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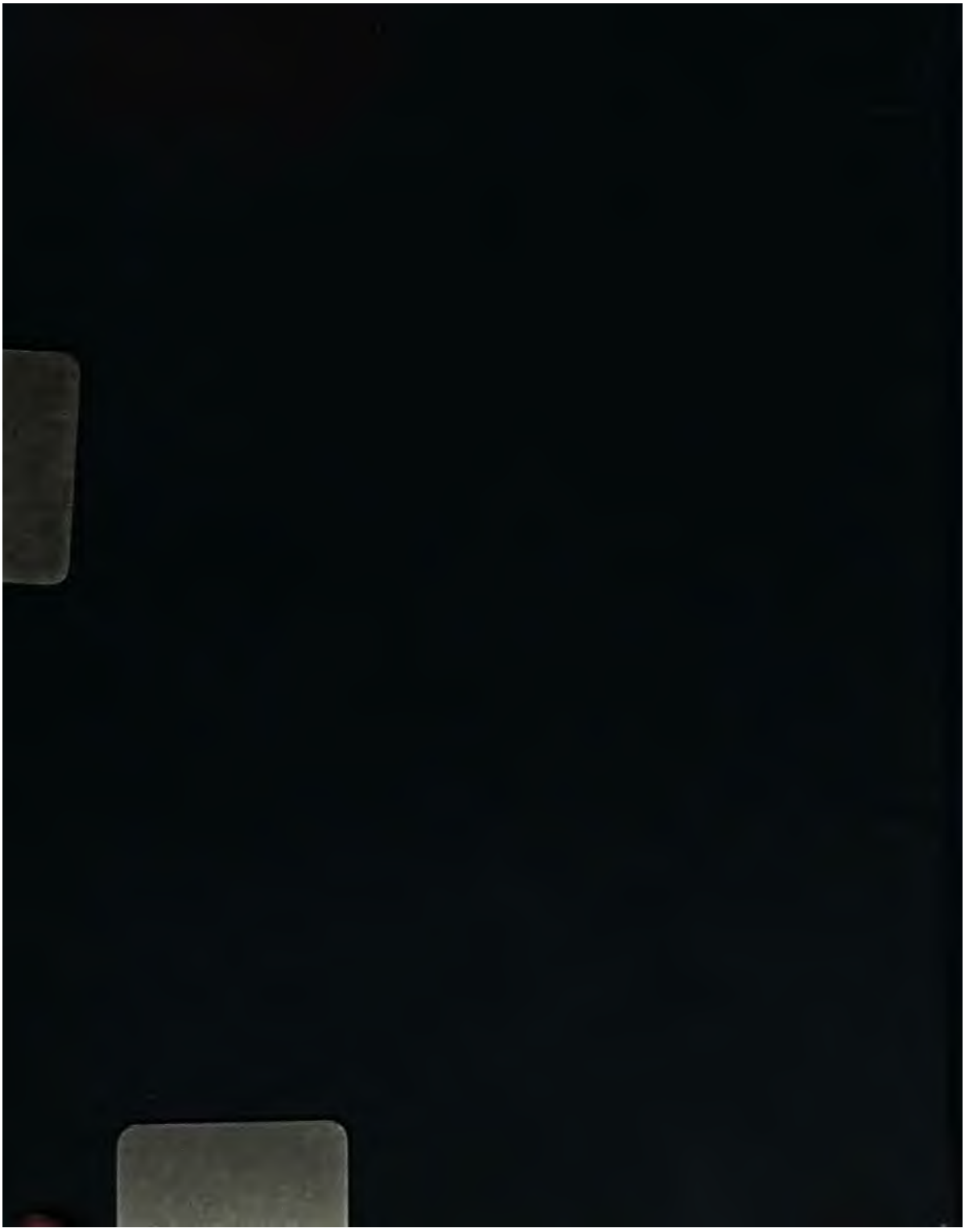

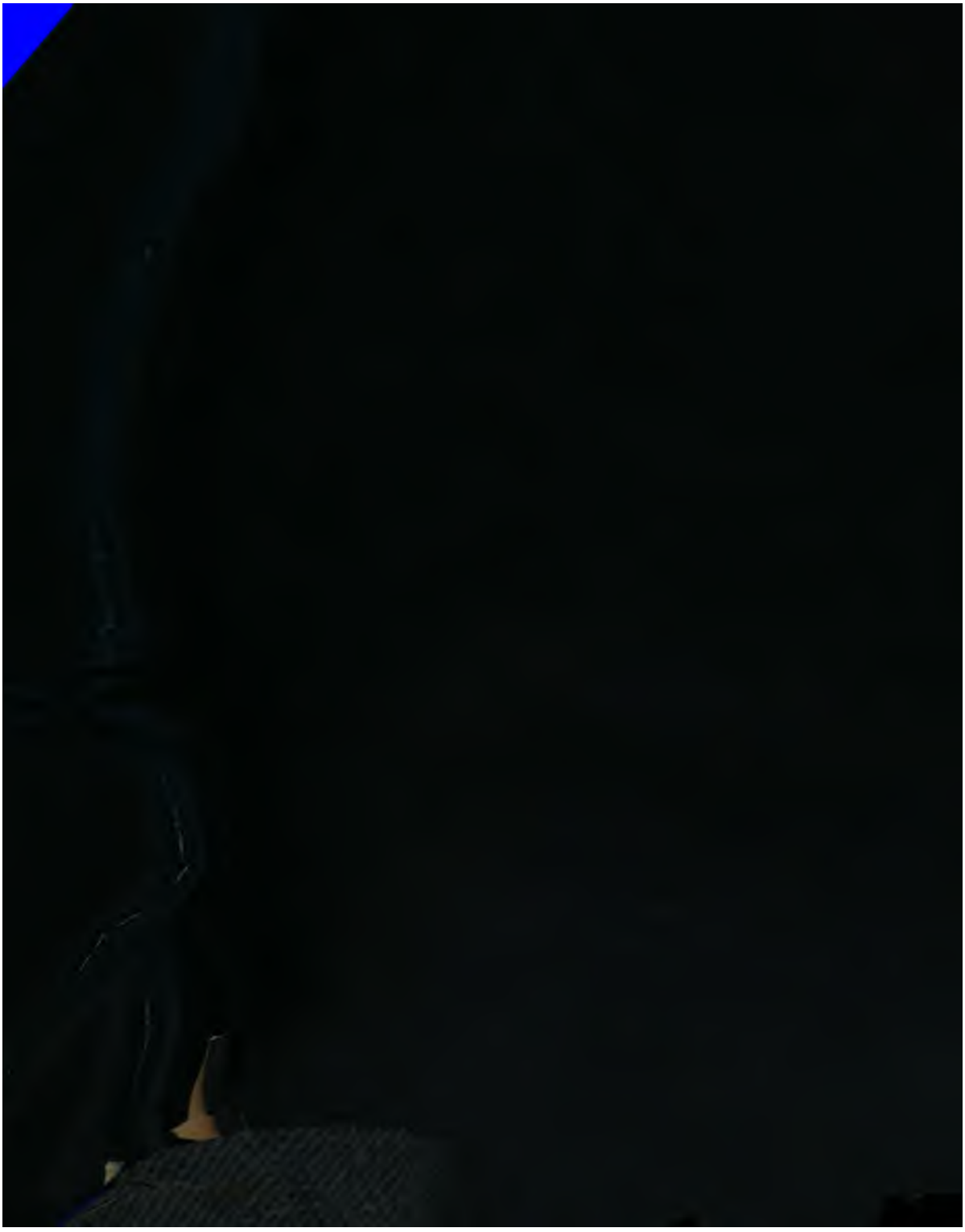

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THE MESSENGER.

HAPPY BIRD forth winging
Through the sunny sky,
To thy far home bringing
My forlorn 'good-bye,'
Gladly, gladly thou dost go,
Thou, the messenger of woe!

Better thus uncaring
Climb thy gusty road,
Why shouldst thou be sharing
In thy bitter load!
Who could wish glad nature's glee
Saddened by our misery!

A LOOKED-FOR MESSENGER.

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MELCOMB MANOR

A Family Chronicle

ARRANGED FROM THE PAPERS OF RICHARD BRENT, ESQ., SOMETIME OF MELCOMB

BY

F. SCARLETT POTTER

AUTHOR OF "THE VOLSUNG TALE," ETC.

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* Wm. Harry Pitt Emerson - 10 Oct. 1912

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MELCOMB MANOR.

PROLOGUE.

THE twilight is gathering round me as I am sitting in the great wainscoted parlour of my old manor-house, Melcomb Manor. Through the dim quarries in the mullioned windows, I can see the leaves drifting downwards, now faster and now more slowly, as the pelting rain and the cold November wind come driving by. I am alone here, quite alone, for I am a widower and childless; so it is not strange that at times like this I should be troubled with gloomy thoughts.

The wind has torn great branches from the old trees, for they are grown hollow and decayed through age; and in the old house the walls lean aslant, and big cracks have opened. What does it matter? I am an old man, and when I am gone the old place will pass to a new name and strange owners. There have been Brents of Melcomb for four centuries and more, but I shall be the last of the name.

I say, "Let ruin come, and what does it matter?" Yet I love this old place better than all the world beside. Well-nigh my whole life has been spent in this house. I have seen some joy in it, and when sorrow came it found me here. I have, years ago, ceased caring to mix with mankind, and my griefs have made me

cling more closely to these familiar walls. So it is that now, when I must needs find occupation to drive away the thoughts that vex me, I have resolved to write the histories of some of those that have lived here—by-gone members of my house, with whose lives I am familiar from family papers and traditions. Of nothing else could I so much care to write; and, who knows, there may be some who will care to read what I shall have written.

The Manor of Melcomb, as our oldest charter sets forth, was anciently a part of the possessions of the great Earl of Leicester; but after his forfeiture, it was, upon the tenure of a man-at-arms to do duty in the Welsh Marches, granted to one Hugh Massenger, in reward for services done to the king at the battle of Evesham and elsewhere, during the Barons' Wars.

It was by the above-named esquire that the first house at Melcomb was founded, and some remains of the buildings which he raised are still to be traced out by those curious in such matters; though most part of the dwelling, as it now stands, is of later times. This earliest house would seem to have been in no way a place of strength, but, for the age in which it was built, it must have been a fair and goodly abode. From Hugh Massenger the manor passed to his only son, also named Hugh.

According to an ancient record among our muniments, this second Hugh Massenger had, by his wife Dame Eleanor, five sons and one daughter, of whom Reginald, the eldest, was, by misadventure of Stephen, the second, slain with a birding-bolt; whereupon Stephen went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and there died. Shortly afterwards, the three younger sons—Ralph, Henry, and Walter—all perished in the wars of those times; the two last, Henry and Walter, being slain in one day, both of them together, like the sons of Eli the Priest. Whereby it came to pass, that in his old age this Hugh Massenger had no issue left to him but his youngest child, Alice; and it is of her that I shall first have to write more at large.

MISTRESS ALICE MASSENGER.

I.—THE FALCON AND THE DOVE.

THE afternoon sun was shining brightly, and Mistress Alice Massenger had stepped out into her pleasaunce, that she might feed her doves. Although Mistress Alice had just reached an age at which pleasure is most keenly relished, her life as yet had not been one to afford her much variety of enjoyment. For since the evil news had been brought to Melcomb that her last remaining brother was dead, her mother, Dame Eleanor, had sunk into hopeless weakness both of body and mind; so that between frequent attendance in her mother's chamber, and the charge of the household, which had now fallen upon her, the life of Mistress Alice was one rather of duty than of pleasure. Hence it was that she turned the more lovingly to such quiet, homely delights as her flowers and her doves.

Thus Mistress Alice was well pleased to watch the gentle birds as they flocked around her, and daintily gathered up the scattered grain; and again, when satisfied with their meal, they rose above her into the air, whirling in wider and wider flights. But her pleasure was soon to give place to alarm, for as she watched, a falcon darted upwards from among the trees, and swooped down upon the terrified pigeons. It was in vain that they huddled together and flew homewards for protection; the

hawk followed, striking one—and that her most cherished favourite—bearing it to the ground within the bounds of the garden, and almost at the feet of its mistress.

If fair Mistress Alice Massenger had been a bolder damsel, she would at once have tried to free her pet from its captor; but Alice was not bold, and she feared the formidable beak and claws of the falcon; so she did what seemed to her to be the first and most natural thing to do—that is to say, she screamed for help, and somewhat loudly.

It may be that she did so in a louder voice than was needful, for help was nearer at hand than she had supposed. Almost at the moment, a young man leaped over the low fence of the pleasaunce, and ran quickly towards the dove, which still struggled in the falcon's clutch. He would have proceeded more deliberately, but Mistress Alice prayed him to save her favourite; and as he could see no other ready way of releasing it alive, he dealt the falcon a blow on the head with the hawking-pole which he carried, that laid it motionless. Then taking up the bleeding pigeon, he handed it tenderly to its mistress.

For a few moments the whole thoughts of the maiden were given to her wounded pet; but though at first it lay motionless in her hands, and was somewhat ruffled and torn, she soon saw that its fright was greater than its hurt; and she then turned that she might offer her thanks to the stranger who had rescued it.

The young man was kneeling over the falcon, as though trying to bring it back to life. He was not, as Mistress Alice thought, an ill-favoured youth, although his face was brown from sun and wind, and his dress, which was such as might have been worn by a huntsman or falconer, bore the marks of long travel and hard service. The look of anxiety with which he regarded the bird convinced her that he must have been its owner, and that it was dearly prized. As the lady made these observations, he rose from his fruitless labour, for such it was; the falcon was dead.

"I am greatly bounden to you, good youth," she said, "for the life of my dove; yet I fear me that you have rescued it at too great a cost to yourself."

"As to that, fair lady," he replied, "I have, indeed, lost as good a falcon as any in this realm, though she were but a falcon-lanier; and in her I may well say that I have lost my one possession and my only friend."

"Alas!" said Mistress Alice; "if it were thus, better by far that the dove had been slain."

"Not so, fair lady; I have but paid the price of my own heedlessness in letting my falcon escape, by mischance, from my fist; and for the rest you owe me no thanks, for I did only what every true man is bounden to do for every damsel who needs service, let the loss to himself thereby be what it may."

From the humble dress of the stranger youth, Alice had scarcely looked for so much of the spirit of chivalry from his lips as was shown in this speech; but it pleased her, nevertheless. She only answered him, however, by repeating her thanks, and asking if there were no way in which she could do him some service in requital for the death of his hawk.

"I am," he replied, "as you doubtless see, a stranger in these parts. My birth-place is in the north country, and the name by which I am known is Giles Burston. As to my history, it is one but too often heard in these evil times. My kindred, as reason would, have followed the fortunes of their liege lord, and have suffered in his ruin; so that I have in my own country neither home nor friends left to me. I now seek to gain service as a huntsman or a falconer with any lord or gentleman who will give meat and shelter in return for a strong arm and a willing heart. It was for this purpose that I was making my way to Melcomb, when my hawk broke her jesses, and I followed her hither."

"It is well," said Mistress Alice; "I will speak for you to my father."

The young man bowed, and retired to make his way by the more ordinary entrance to Melcomb Manor.

II.—INMATES AND NEIGHBOURS AT MELCOMB.

ON re-entering the house, Mistress Alice lost no time in seeking the great hall, for it was there that her father was always to be found at that hour of the day. The part of the house at Melcomb in which this was situated has long since given place to rooms better suited to the habits of later ages. It was a long and tolerably wide and lofty apartment, the timbered roof being open to the ridge-tree. The wide fire-place was innocent of a chimney, for, as I have been given to understand, that curious invention was not introduced till some fifty years later. Across the upper end of the hall was the table of dais, reserved for the master of the house, his family, and his more important guests; whilst the lower part of the room was common to the inferior members of the household.

By reason of his age, the old lord of Melcomb had long since ceased from taking any part in military matters, or in the more active business of life. His mornings, when the season warranted, were generally still occupied with field sports; but after the noontide dinner, he rarely left his seat on the dais, but passed his time with the flagon, and such company as fortune threw in his way.

When Mistress Alice entered to relate the adventure of the hawk and the dove, and to make her request to her father, she found him in conversation with the two individuals who at that period formed his most ordinary society. Neither of them could be called young men, although the united ages of the two would not have greatly exceeded that of their host.

One of these was Sir John Bigod, whose lands and castle of Hilworth Bigod were so near to Melcomb, that he might be said to be Master Hugh Massenger's nearest neighbour. Yet till quite recently he had been but little known to the old esquire; for Sir John, who bore the reputation of being a hardy soldier, had all his life been busied in the many wars of those times, and had of late years held divers commands in The Marches, under the great Gilbert Fitz-Turold, where he was said to mix with the

native Welsh "like salt among eels." But there was now some short space of quiet in those parts, and Sir John had retired to recreate himself for a while on his patrimonial estate.

Thus it came that the ancient lord of Melcomb had but little sure knowledge of the knight's past life. Rumour, indeed, told many things of it which it was not good to hear; but to these Hugh Massenger gave small heed, knowing well that in those days of evil deeds and misrule no man who took an active part in public affairs could escape without blame, or altogether without deserving it. For the rest, he was by no means disposed to be displeased with the friendly overtures of a neighbour so much more powerful than himself.

There were, indeed, some who were ready to affirm that Sir John Bigod's friendship was not altogether disinterested, but who hinted that he coveted the fair lands of Melcomb, and designed to add them to his own by a union with their heiress. If such were the case, the desire was not an unreasonable one on his part, for the two manors, throughout their whole length, were separated only by a small stream, and to no one else could the domain of Melcomb have been so valuable.

Master Massenger's second companion was an ecclesiastic. The scheme of the modest household at Melcomb Manor was not supposed to include a chaplain; yet Father Oswald had for months past been a resident there, and had performed many of the duties proper to such a functionary. Some two years before the time of which I am speaking, the worthy father had sought the neighbouring priory of Halliford as a retreat till certain political troubles in which he was involved should have blown over, and had afterwards found a shelter at Melcomb. It is true that an amnesty had now been granted to all those engaged in the Earl of Lancaster's affair, who had not already suffered; but still, the good priest seemed in no haste to leave his new friends for the country whence his old ones had been removed by the executioner or by forfeiture. At Melcomb he found himself duly appreciated. No small portion of his time was required to direct Dame Eleanor's devotions; and he was quite ready to share in the sports, or to take a moderate part in a carouse with her

husband, who found him at all times a jovial and pleasant companion. Yet under an easy exterior Father Oswald carried an active and able brain, and one that had been found of no mean service in the plottings of his northern friends.

The presence of the worthy priest was in no way unpleasing to Mistress Alice, who knew well that in him she might always count upon a staunch ally. But she could well have dispensed with that of the knight of Hilworth, towards whom she had already formed a stronger feeling of dislike than she could have defended by valid reasons; and this feeling was heightened by the dread that he might ere long become her suitor, and, if so, a suitor whom it would be at the same time impossible to accept and difficult to refuse.

So Alice told her little story as briefly as might be; and after praying her father to interest himself on behalf of the stranger whose service to her had been attended by so sad a misfortune to himself, she at once withdrew.

Perhaps some thought of his own past sorrows touched the heart of the priest, and inclined him to feel for those of the young wanderer, as well as a desire to further the wishes of Mistress Alice. "Alas!" he said, "for these evil times! Many there be of noble blood and gentle breeding who are now homeless; it may be that the youth is one of these, and that he suffers not by his own default. Let him not pass away unheard."

"Even as you say, Sir Priest," answered the knight; these are evil and lawless times, when outlaws and strong thieves do violence throughout the land, and none check them; and when no man knows whether the stranger who seeks hospitality at nightfall may not be the spy to let in a band of plunderers at midnight. Therefore, I counsel our host to have a care in whatever he does in this matter."

As Sir John Bigod finished his admonition, young Burston was ushered into the hall. He had little to say of himself more than we have already heard; but his face and bearing pleased the old esquire, and when he received a signal to retire, it was with the understanding that he was engaged to remain at Melcomb in the capacity of falconer.

"He is none of this country," said Father Oswald, when Burston was seated out of ear-shot, at the lower end of the hall; "and yet there is that in the looks of the youth which recalls some face I have known well, though whose face it may be I cannot say."

Sir John did not speak; yet if he had given expression to the thought that was at that moment passing through his mind, he would have used well-nigh the same words.

III.—RIVALS.

GILES BURSTON, when established in his new post, did not find its duties irksome, nor did time hang heavily on his hands, and that for a certain reason not difficult to understand. Ever since the adventure which had marked his arrival at Melcomb, he had felt a deep interest in Mistress Alice; and this interest was in no danger of dying out, since, though at the distance imposed upon him by his inferior position, he now had opportunities of seeing her constantly. In this he was favoured by his occupation, for in fair weather Mistress Alice frequently rode a-hawking with her father, and on these occasions Burston was often able to display the same spirit of chivalrous devotion in her service which had won her notice at their first interview. When their sport was followed upon the uplands, the active falconer was always ready to guide her palfrey in safety through the morass or along the shelving path; or when they pursued the larger game of the river, he did not hesitate to plunge, hawking-pole in hand, into the stream whenever a ford had to be taken, that he might lead him carefully past the dangerous pools. Nor was his gallantry altogether unacceptable to Mistress Alice, who, retired as was her life, was not unaffected by that taste for romance which characterised the more polished society of the age, and was therefore quite ready to appreciate such conduct. Indeed, there was much, both in the person and character of young Burston, calculated to gain the regard of such a maiden;

and it is quite possible that the social difference between them, which would, under ordinary circumstances, in those days, have formed an insuperable obstacle to any feeling of interest on the part of the lady, might in this case serve rather to arouse it, since Alice could not but infer from the language and bearing of the youth that he must have been born to a higher station than that which he now occupied.

It is certain also that, inadvertently, Sir John Bigod was a means of strengthening any interest that Mistress Alice might feel in Giles Burston. In those days, as is well known, considerations of policy or material advantage were more studied in the arrangement of matches than the inclinations of young ladies; and Sir John had supposed that, after securing the father to his interests, the daughter would comply, as a matter of course. But although Hugh Massenger readily admitted that the match would be advantageous and pleasing to himself, he had too tender an affection for his one remaining child—the daughter of his old age—to consent in any way to exert his authority in enforcing her compliance. Thus the knight found that the success of his suit must wholly depend upon his efforts to please the lady herself; and as his gallantry savoured rather of the camp than of the court, it was little pleasing to a maiden of Alice's disposition, and she naturally turned from him towards one who in many respects contrasted with him so favourably.

It was after a visit to Melcomb, during which the stout knight of Hilworth had been compelled to admit to himself that his suit made but sorry progress, that he resolved upon a notable scheme of wooing, which will be seen to bring about important results in the course of this chronicle. "By 'r Lady!" he cogitated, as he rode homewards through the deep mire caused by the heavy rains, and turned over in his mind the events of the day—"By 'r Lady! the pretty fool is too nice to lend an ear to a plain, blunt soldier. May the fiend take the clerk who taught her to read! She hath crammed her silly brain-pan with Lays of Provence and Gestes of the old Bretons, and must needs have some Sir Tristram or Sir Lancelot to woo her with his vagaries. Well, be it so; an old soldier is not easily beaten from the

field; I have seen somewhat of stratagems in war, and, if need be, can try one in love. This Damsel Adventurous shall have her perils, and the good knight Sir John Bigod shall be her rescue; and this, methinks, should go far with such a maiden as my Mistress Alice."

The politic knight was so taken with the humour of his own device, that it held him in laughter for full a bowshot's space, by which time he came to the banks of the little river which he must needs ford. He found the stream so swollen with the rains that he was wet to the girdle, and his mirth was exchanged for curses long before he had reached the opposite side. "I vow to St. Christopher," he exclaimed, as he spurred along the road for Hilworth, "that when the banks on both sides are mine, I will build a bridge over this accursed ford!" As this history is unfolded, we shall see how soon Sir John had cause to keep his vow, or whether occasion arose for it ever to be kept at all.

IV.—A STRATAGEM IN LOVE.

IN the course of his career, Sir John Bigod had engaged in many undertakings for which, far more than for the present innocent manœuvre, secret and unscrupulous agents were indispensable, and he had not much difficulty in choosing from among his followers three persons who were properly qualified for carrying out his plans. These men, disguised as outlaws, were to seize and carry off Mistress Alice, at such a time and by such a way as Sir John should appoint them; when they were to be met by himself, and, after some show of resistance, put to flight. Of the real alarm which such an adventure might cause to a tender maiden the rough soldier took but little heed, whilst he relied much upon her gratitude, and perhaps upon her admiration for his prowess, for advancing him in her favour; nor did he doubt but that his intimacy with the family at Melcomb, and his knowledge of their movements, would soon enable him to fix a time for putting his project in execution.

Such an opportunity was afforded not long afterwards, by one of those hawking excursions upon which the old esquire carried his daughter with him. Sir John had himself been asked to attend them, but he alleged business as an excuse for not being present during the earlier part of the day, and held out a prospect of joining them at a later hour.

In accordance with the early habits of the age, the old lord of Melcomb and his daughter rode forth at sunrise, and pursued their sport with varying success throughout the morning, their only attendant being Giles Burston, who, for the better discharge of his office, was on foot. Noon drew near, and as Sir John Bigod had not yet presented himself, the party turned homewards. Leaving the tract of open country over which they had hawked, they had already reached the skirts of the wood through which lay the direct road to Melcomb, when game was sprung, and a tiercelet was cast off for a final flight. The quarry was struck far off in the open field; and whilst the old esquire rode after it, and the falconer followed to reclaim the hawk, Mistress Alice, who was by this time somewhat tired, remained under the pleasant shade of the trees.

The falcon was hooded, and the partridge secured, and the sportsmen came leisurely back to the spot from which they had started; but no Mistress Alice was now to be seen.

"My daughter is wearied, and has turned homewards before us," said the old man; and with that he rode briskly forwards in the direction of Melcomb, leaving the falconer to follow more slowly.

In another instant Giles Burston would have taken the same track, but at that moment he observed footprints and marks on the trampled grass, which arrested his attention. There were clearly the traces of two or three men close to the hoof-marks of the palfrey, and equally fresh; and as the fears of a lover are easily roused, these filled him with suspicion and alarm. Following the traces, which was a matter of difficulty, he had just convinced himself that they did not turn down the path for Melcomb, but diverged into one leading for a considerable distance through an unfrequented part of the woods, when a smothered scream

from the same direction reached his ear, and he at once dashed forward at his swiftest speed. It was a narrow, winding track, between thick trees and underwood; and Burston pushed on, for some time seeing nothing of the objects of his pursuit. At length he bounded up a hill, and sprang with still fleeter footsteps down the opposite slope; and now a sharp turn in the path brought him suddenly upon them.

Mistress Alice was, indeed, in evil plight. Two varlets, in the Kendal-green suits which formed the common livery of outlaws, and with hoods drawn over their faces, guarded her on either side, whilst a third led and urged along her palfrey. Giles Burston saw this, and was upon them with his hawking-pole at once.

The falconer was strong and active, and laid lustily about him; and after a few blows were exchanged, his opponents took to their heels. To speak truth, having been only engaged to run away, they had no special inducement to stay for the hard knocks which were just then being freely dealt, and chose rather at once to leave him in quiet possession of the field.

He was now able to turn to Mistress Alice, and it was in good time that he did so, for she had fainted, and, but for his ready help, would have fallen to the ground. He lifted her gently from the saddle, and laid her upon the bank close at hand, whilst a little rill, which came leaping down among the bushes hard by, supplied him with water to sprinkle upon her face. In a few minutes he had the satisfaction of seeing signs of returning life.

To Alice Massenger, who, unlike ourselves, knew nothing of Sir John's romantic plot, this jocular abduction had all the terrors of a real one; she could not tell to what perils she might not be exposed in the hands of these miscreants, and she made known her thankfulness to her deliverer in no reluctant terms. Emboldened by her gratitude, the young falconer courteously acknowledged his sense of it by kissing her hand. The homage was not ungraciously received; and what wonder if, forgetting every motive of prudence which might under other circumstances have closed his lips, and being conscious only of the strangeness

of the situation, the loneliness of the spot, and the fact that, for the moment, all barriers between himself and the lady of his heart were broken down, he should have poured into her ears all the story of his love, and that he should have found a willing listener? The deep, cool, mid-day shadow of the woods, the mossy bank, and the sparkling rivulet, formed an admirable background to a love scene; but they were probably quite unnoticed by the young pair who there plighted troth.

Giles Burston said many things; yet he did not, as Alice doubtless expected, give any frank account of his birth or parentage. On this score he only said, somewhat proudly, "Before I claim my bride, I shall prove that in birth, at least, I am not unworthy of her;" and with this his mistress was content. The kiss which sealed this compact was not impressed on the lady's hand, and the ceremony was scarcely completed when they were startled by the trampling of horse-hoofs on the soft turf. They looked up and saw, slowly riding down the path towards them, Sir John Bigod.

V.—WHAT FATHER OSWALD SAW ABROAD.

ANY one might have supposed that a spot more secure from intrusion than the one described could scarcely be found; and yet, as chance would have it, the knight of Hilworth Bigod was not the only spectator of this tender scene. From a greater distance, it is true, and somewhat indistinctly by reason of intervening branches, yet clearly enough to convey something of its import, it had also been observed by that worthy ecclesiastic, Father Oswald.

Early on that day the good father had marched off, staff in hand, over the hills, to pay a morning visit to his good friends, the brethren of Halliford Priory; there to discuss certain points of discipline, and, by the way, certain horns of that strong ale for which the establishment in question enjoyed so honourable a reputation.

This controversy, unlike many discussions on religious questions, appears to have passed off most amicably, for the worthy priest was pursuing his homeward journey in a state of the most perfect charity with all mankind, and chanting as he went, in a rather husky voice, some such edifying verse as this—

"Then put aside all wrath,
For David shew'd us hath
Vinum letificat
Cor hominis;"

when he came to the conclusion that the sun was very hot. He had now reached the outskirts of Melcomb Wood, and the idea of resting in the grateful shadow was irresistible; so he sat down at the root of a large oak surrounded by bushes, and proceeded to refresh himself by finishing the small flask which, filled with a choice vintage, his good friend the sub-prior had, in the excess of hospitality, forced into his bosom at parting.

The shade was cool and pleasant; and after affectionately pledging his friend, and draining the nethermost drop, the good father was in no haste to move; so instead he leant his back to the tree, and lazily hummed another stave of his carol—

"A merry heart in cage
Maketh a lusty age—"

but at this point a certain sight met his vision which at once reduced him to a more serious frame of mind.

Through the tops of the low bushes by which he was himself concealed, he saw first one, then a second, and then a third figure, in the well-known guise of outlaws, emerge from the covert. The sight filled him with alarm—not by any means on his own account, for beyond his empty flask he had nothing to lose; and even with men so lawless as these might be supposed to be, the person of a churchman was sure of respect—but he feared that their presence might portend anything but good to those who were now his best and dearest friends. Bands of such banditti were at that time scattered but far too plentifully over most districts of the country, but, fortunately, none had been known to haunt the neighbourhood of Melcomb for a generation past. What piece of mischief was there, then, on foot to bring

these miscreants here? As he watched them through his leafy screen, Bigod's words of caution rose to Father Oswald's memory. Could it be possible that these fellows were in league with the strange falconer for the perpetration of some scheme of plunder or villany against the inmates of Melcomb Manor?

At this instant he observed a horseman advancing at a rapid pace along the road by which he had himself travelled, in whom he soon recognised none other than Sir John Bigod. "Ha! ha!" thought Father Oswald; "now this doughty knight comes among us, my men in Kendal-green will show me that their company is wanted in haste elsewhere!" Great, therefore, was the astonishment of the churchman when he saw that the apparent outlaws, instead of flying, came forward to meet the knight as he approached, and were soon engaged in close and, as it would seem, confidential conversation with him.

Father Oswald's observatory was at too great a distance from the group to permit of his overhearing anything that was said, and the whole affair perplexed him in no moderate degree; but from what he saw he drew a tolerably just inference—namely, that whatever might be the underhand business afloat, Sir John Bigod was privy to it, and he resolved to keep a sharp look-out upon the knight for the future.

Full of this resolution, the priest continued to watch him when the conference broke up, and Sir John rode slowly onwards by the path that descended into the wood; and keeping himself under cover, took care not to lose sight of him. Thus it was that Father Oswald became an unintentional spectator of the strictly private scene above recorded.

VI.—WHAT FATHER OSWALD SAW AT HOME.

THE story of Mistress Alice's adventure, and of her rescue by Giles Burston, was soon known to all at Melcomb, but the further result of that adventure was not known; for Sir John Bigod, although he altogether despised such a rival as the

falconer, saw that some decided measures for his removal would be necessary, and was not likely to babble of a secret which so nearly concerned himself, and which he imagined to be unknown to any fourth person.

Father Oswald also kept his own counsel upon this point, and indeed upon all that he had seen in Melcomb Wood. When the story of the abduction was told to the wary priest, he said nothing, but could not for a moment doubt in his own mind that the three men in Kendal-green whom he had seen were the offenders, or that they were acting under Sir John Bigod's orders. And here it must be admitted that his acuteness carried him somewhat too far, for being ignorant of the intended rescue, he concluded that the knight's designs with regard to Mistress Alice were of the blackest nature possible, and accordingly resolved to use proportionate vigilance in thwarting them. To some extent this determination, and the necessity which it imposed upon him of not weakening his position by showing his antagonist the extent of his discoveries, kept him silent with regard to what he had witnessed of the love scene.

There was, indeed, at first some conflict in his mind as to whether he were not bound to drop some hint to the old lord of Melcomb as to the danger his daughter incurred of forming an unsuitable attachment. But there were arguments on the other side. He liked the youth, and had some fellow-feeling for his wandering and friendless condition; and without more certain information, it would, he thought, be hard to deprive him of a home and a patron. Under any circumstances, it would be well to sound Burston, and learn how far the affair had actually proceeded, before taking further steps. We shall see that Father Oswald's researches in this direction led to far other discoveries than those which he had anticipated.

It will be remembered that when Giles Burston first presented himself at Melcomb, his features had recalled some familiar face to the remembrance of both the knight and the priest. Since that time this resemblance had often occurred to Father Oswald's thoughts, but no clue had as yet presented itself by which he could unravel the mystery. That clue was now to be supplied.

It was in the afternoon of the day following that of the adventure, and whilst the old esquire was taking his ordinary after-dinner nap, that Father Oswald made up his mind to have a little private talk with Giles Burston. The young man had some time since left the hall to attend to his duties at the falconry, and thither the holy father prepared to follow him. As he passed down the hall for that purpose, he observed that the falconer had by chance left his hunting-knife at his place at the table, for in those days each man brought his own knife to the board. "A fair excuse," thought the priest; "I carry his whittle to the flyer of hawks, and therewith begin me my dialogue."

Father Oswald took up the knife. It was of rich and curious workmanship—the haft, which was of silver, being fantastically wrought into the figure of a wyvern. As he went on his way and examined it, old associations connected with the heraldic device entered his memory, and the image of one long since known and numbered with the dead—one whose crest was the wyvern, and whose features wore the expression that had perplexed him in Giles Burston—rose before his eyes. "It is strange," said Father Oswald to himself, as he crossed the stone courtyard, "that I should not have thought of this before; truly, now, I shall not need to ask with Saul, King of Jewry, 'Whose son is this stripling?'"

It may be that the first idea of the priest was at once to open his surmises to, and seek for a confirmation of them at the lips of the falconer; but if such was the case, a moment's reflection fixed his determination to act with caution, and to do nothing as yet which would compel him to make a confidant of the youth. He therefore contented himself with putting a few subtle questions, the drift of which was not perceptible, and the answers he received were such as to convince him that his conjectures were well founded; nor did he fail, though that now appeared a secondary matter in his eyes, to worm out the exact position of Burston's affairs with Alice Massenger. Before leaving the falconry, he drew forth the knife, and handed it to Giles Burston, saying, "Take this device, and if thou shouldst meet with the son of the good knight who bore it at Boroughbridge, bid him

remember and observe the motto that goes therewith, whereof the first word is, 'Silentio!' and chiefly let him remember this, and hide well his whittle, when he standeth before Sir John Bigod."

The young falconer showed that he understood the hint, by asking for no explanation; and from that hour he found that he had a warm friend and a zealous partisan in Father Oswald.

VII.—TACTICS.

IN spite of the various under-currents which we have been tracing, the stream of life at Melcomb Manor continued to wear upon its surface precisely the same appearance that it had worn previously. In outward bearing the different members of the family were the same to each other as before, and the visits of Sir John Bigod still continued to furnish the same satisfaction to Hugh Massenger, and the same opposite sensation to Mistress Alice. A change was, however, now drawing near at hand.

About this time the intelligence brought to Sir John Bigod from the Marches began to be of a nature which left him little prospect of remaining long at Hilworth. New disturbances among the Welsh were imminent, and he began to prepare for that summons which he saw must shortly recall him to his post.

Among other matters, he hastened to mature his plans for the removal of Giles Burston. Although in the falconer's conduct towards Mistress Alice Massenger he had seen that which was gall and wormwood to him, he had, at the time, passed it over in contemptuous silence; it was not for him to waste words on such a rival, but to crush him when opportunity should offer. Under other circumstances, Sir John might have waited patiently for such an occasion; but now, when he might any day be called from the neighbourhood, he must make sure that his rival would not be left behind him. He therefore took advantage of the first chance of private conversation with Hugh Massenger which

occurred to point out to him the dangers of retaining such a person as Burston in his household; but the old esquire had taken kindly to his falconer, and had conceived no light opinion of his services in the wood; he was not, therefore, easily to be persuaded.

"Nay, nay," he said; "the youth is a good youth, and is, as one may well see, of gentle breeding. It were a shame to me if I should drive him from my doors."

"As to his gentle breeding," replied the knight, "if all I hear be true, it will go for but little. I had in mine own mind a thought that I must have seen this youth before he came hither; and one of my fellows avers that he is neither more nor less than the son of old Bustin, the vintner, at Warwick. His fine airs have doubtless been learnt from the gallants of the earl's following, who frequent his father's house; and now he must needs try to pass himself for a gentleman under disguise, with the hope, it may be, to carry off a lady of lands. Have a care, then, Master Massenger, and clip this tiercelet's wing before he have time to strike the quarry."

The old lord of Melcomb had too high a respect for his powerful neighbour to question his words, even though they were given on no better authority than the assertion of one of his own serving-men. Yet his liking for Burston, and his unwillingness to act unjustly towards him, were not easily to be overcome. "Nay, nay," he said; "the youth is a good youth, and hath done good service; he must not be turned forth into the world till his fault be proven against him."

"True," replied the knight; "nor would I, upon no better cause than suspicion, counsel you to do him injury; though you must needs look to the peace of your own house, and it may be that you will best advance the youth's own fortunes at the same time. By your tenure, you must furnish one man-at-arms to serve in the Marches; and since Peter Coulter had his skull cracked at Hereford fair with a black-jack, by Morgan-ap-Rhys, for calling 'leeks good meat for goslings,' we have had none. Send this gay tapster with me. If he have manhood in him, he will gladly go to the wars, and I shall see that he lacks no

advancement befitting his birth; if he be craven, and fear blows, bid him, since he loves it, go in peace."

These words of Sir John Bigod bore so much the appearance of reason and genuine friendship, that Hugh Massenger had nothing to oppose to them, and so was obliged, reluctantly, to assent to the knight's proposal. Nor did Burston, when his master's wishes were made known to him, see any way by which he could avoid the proffered employment. To a high-spirited youth there was, of course, in itself nothing distasteful in the prospect of a few months of border warfare. But Melcomb Manor had now become to him the dearest spot upon earth, and to leave it and Alice Massenger would be the greatest of evils; and besides this, he had reasons for doubting whether the feelings of the man who was now to be his superior could be altogether those of kindness towards him.

If Giles Burston was inclined to question the motives which had induced Sir John Bigod to take him under his protection, there was one other among the inhabitants of Melcomb who did not hesitate at once to ascribe the knight's proceedings to some plan of jealousy or revenge, and that man was Father Oswald. Yet of so peace-loving a disposition was this exemplary priest, that he did not allow his suspicions in any way to interrupt his friendly intercourse with the knight; on the contrary, from this very time he was observed to affect his society still more sedulously than formerly. Nevertheless, it was with some surprise that the household learnt, a fortnight later, that Father Oswald had pledged himself to accompany Sir John Bigod and his troop in the double capacity of chaplain and secretary.

VIII.—A PARTING.

THE departure of Sir John Bigod was more hurried than had been anticipated. Several days earlier than the time at which he had been expected to set out for the Welsh Marches, there came a messenger in all haste from Earl Fitz-Turold, with

the information that Howel Goch was known to be already at the head of a considerable army, and that Sir John was at once required to take charge of the defence of Turvey Castle, as it was probable that that important post would form an early object of attack.

To Giles Burston, who had looked forward to many more days during which he might still be near Mistress Alice, the news that he must on the morrow be ready to leave Melcomb was anything but pleasing. His few preparations were soon made; and then, as the twilight drew on, he strolled forth to take what seemed to him, in his present frame of mind, to be a last look at the environs of a place which had become so dear to him, and to indulge in the gloomy thoughts which he could not overcome. He had not as yet found means of petitioning for a last interview with Alice; and though he knew that she must be well aware of his approaching departure, he did not dare to hope that she would grant him such an interview unasked.

He visited the falconry, and gave his farewell caresses to the noble birds, which must henceforward be cared for by others; and then, finding himself impelled by the recollections of his first coming to Melcomb, he turned his steps towards the hedges of clipped yew which bounded the pleasaunce. As he paced beneath their dark shadows, which harmonised so well with his own sense of present sorrow and his forebodings of future evil, he was startled by a step behind him; he turned, and found himself face to face with Father Oswald.

It was almost in expectation of a reproof for straying to a spot where he might well be suspected of hoping to meet with Mistress Alice, that Burston encountered the worthy father; but he had no grounds for such an apprehension. "My son," said the friendly confessor, "I have been seeking for you. I have thought much on your welfare, and deem it unfitting that you should leave this place without first bidding farewell to Mistress Alice Massenger; and to the end that you may do so without hindrance, I have prevailed upon her that she will, under my guidance, come to the pleasaunce, by the time that the moon is above the tops of yonder trees."

As Father Oswald said this, he pointed to the moon, which

was already shining through the great elms which crowned the banks to the eastward; and without waiting for the falconer's thanks, he turned back towards the house.

Burston opened the wicket, and stood within the sacred precincts of the pleasaunce. For the moment, it seemed that all his troubles had passed away; and the pleasure caused by Father Oswald's intelligence was too fresh in his mind to allow him to think the moon slow in climbing into the open sky. Before she had well done so, the small door in the angle of the gable was heard to open and close again, and Father Oswald and his charge entered the garden.

Between the spot where Giles Burston awaited his mistress and the house, grew an apple-tree. Beneath this, and placing his back to its bole, the discreet churchman stationed himself, and appeared at once to be absorbed in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. The meeting of the lovers was, therefore, almost as much unrestrained as if even this friendly witness had not been present.

Upon Giles Burston's melancholy the announcement of Father Oswald had fallen like a burst of sunlight, but the delight which he had anticipated from the meeting was scarcely destined to be realised; for from the first moment of their interview he could not but see that a still deeper gloom had overshadowed the mind of his mistress than that which had possessed his own. It was in vain that, whilst he tried to stifle his own forebodings, the young man urged that had Sir John formed any serious plan of revenge, he would scarcely have taken another member of the Melcomb household—Father Oswald—to the scene where it was to be carried out.

Mistress Alice shook her head. "Father Oswald," she said, "has taken good care to hide from the knight any love that he may bear towards you; nay, rather, he has made him believe that he hates you, or he would never have ridden upon this journey with Sir John's good-will."

"Nay, sweet Mistress Alice, but I mistrust me that your gentle fears on my behalf make you wrong Sir John Bigod in your thoughts."

"I would it were so," answered Alice; "yet in this I speak not of my own judgment, but after the wiser counsel of Father Oswald. He who is most subtle in knowing men's thoughts, is satisfied that there is evil determined against you. Had he thought otherwise, he would not have wrought upon Sir John to take him in his company."

These words showed much to Giles Burston of which he had before no suspicion. "Can it be, then," he asked, "that care for the safety of a simple man-at-arms, such as I am, is the cause of Father Oswald's going to the wars?"

A faint smile passed over the anxious face of Alice Massenger. "However lightly," she said, "you may yourself account your own welfare, there are, as you see, those who hold it of some worth. Our good father leaves Melcomb for no other cause than that he may watch over your life and well-being."

"Till now," said Burston, "I had thought that Father Oswald went on this journey for pure love that he bore to Sir John Bigod's fellowship. Know you the cause why he undertakes so much labour for my sake?"

"I know not," replied the lady; "but this I know, that when one such as he is so regards your life, you should yourself take good heed to it as a thing of worth; and doubt not but that by one other that wishes you well there shall ever be prayer made for your deliverance, alike from the open enemy, and from the traitor who smites unseen."

Burston clasped the hand of his mistress. "Fear not," he said, "but that against craft I shall ever be wary, and that as to fair blows, my arm can well keep my head;" and then, in a lower tone, he continued, "and, truth to tell, sweet Mistress Alice, it would be greater solace to me, when we are far asunder, could I know that so true a friend as Father Oswald were watching over your safety, instead of caring for mine."

"You speak from the gentleness of your heart," answered she, "and I can well believe your words; but Father Oswald is wise, and knows what is best. When one man whom we know of is away, I stand in no peril here at Melcomb, whilst you will have much to dread. I would fain hope that all will be well; and yet

a great fear has laid hold on me, that here, where we first met, we may also have met for the last time."

Alice's voice trembled as she uttered these words, and before her lover could reply, Father Oswald gave an admonitory cough, to warn the young couple that it was now time the interview came to an end. At that moment a cloud opportunely passed over the moon, and before she again shone out clearly, the farewell had been taken, Burston had left the pleasaunce, and Alice Massenger, with Father Oswald, had re-entered the house.

At early dawn the ex-falconer set forth to join Sir John Bigod's troop, and before evening he and his comrades were far away to the west. The spare horses and baggage followed more slowly a few hours later; and with these, as their pace better befitted his clerical character, travelled Father Oswald. Many words of comfort did the worthy priest speak to Mistress Alice before he went, with promises of intelligence whenever occasion might offer; and that he might the better have it in his power to send her some tidings, he carried among his worldly goods certain of her doves. "For these posts," he said, "be more worthy of trust than are men, who have legs to linger, and tongues to babble withal."

IX.—DANGER.

THE hasty ride across a country as yet unknown to him, and the novelty of a soldier's life, soon wore away much of the sorrow which Giles Burston had felt at leaving Melcomb, as well as his apprehension of coming villany; so that in a little while he began to look forward with some pleasure to the stirring scenes in which he hoped shortly to be engaged.

Yet when Turvey Castle had been reached, and when, day after day, no active enterprise was undertaken, he found life in garrison to be, what the ardent youth of all ages have found it, of all others perhaps the most tedious. As yet, Sir John Bigod's

duty was only to keep this post against the enemy, of whom a large force, under Howel himself, was not far distant. Fitz-Turold, who had been engaged against the Welshmen further to the south, was now said to be drawing near, and when he came there was good hope of action and hard blows; as yet, however, there was only the wearisome duty of keeping watch and ward.

Father Oswald arrived at the castle some days later than Burston, but he appeared to shun intercourse with the young man-at-arms, if it were possible, even more carefully than at Melcomb. Burston would gladly have talked with him, and asked him concerning many things; he was curious to know what motive could have induced the priest to take so deep an interest in himself, and he naturally desired to ascertain whether the astute churchman's watchfulness had enabled him to fathom any revengeful project on the part of Sir John; but he rightly concluded that Father Oswald's conduct was adopted from motives of policy, and that he should best aid his plans by avoiding him as much as possible.

On one occassion only did the priest beckon him into the little turret-chamber, which he called his own, that he might speak to him a few words in private. Apparently his chief object was to charge the youth, in case any extraordinary orders were given him; and more especially, if he received directions to leave the castle upon any solitary commission, at once to make the matter known to himself. Burston gave the required promise, and was proceeding to ask for further information, when Father Oswald briefly answered that there was treachery afoot, and that in order to defeat it, watchfulness and silence would be necessary.

Not many days later than this interview, Giles Burston was summoned into the presence of Sir John Bigod. The knight's words and manner seemed intended to convince the youth that he wished only to be considered by him as his good friend and patron. He had, he said, received from his neighbour, Master Hugh Massenger, such high commendations of his retainer, that he desired to give him good employment on such services as might

lead to notice and promotion. "For this reason," he continued, "together with the opinion I have myself formed of you, you have been chosen to carry my answer to Howel Goch, concerning certain exchanges of prisoners, and other matters now in treaty between us."

To this flattering speech Burston only bowed.

"Two archers," resumed the knight, "to whom the country is well known, shall see you as far as the nearest outposts of the rebels, and thence you will have safe conduct to their chief, to whom you will bear a packet. Observe all that you may, and meddle in no man's business; as to your homeward journey, Howel will himself take charge for it."

As Sir John uttered the last words, there was, to Burston's ears, a touch of irony in his tone; but this, he said to himself, might be but fancy. However, having received his packet, he made it his first business to search for Father Oswald, that he might acquaint him with what he had heard; and it was then he first learnt that the father had that morning set out for a neighbouring garrison, and would not return till sunset.

Burston was not a little disconcerted by this discovery, and had it been possible, he would not have set forth upon his mission till the father's return; but Sir John's orders were peremptory, and required his instant departure; he had therefore no choice but to obey. The two men who accompanied him were rough, plain soldiers, who had long been stationed in the castle; and from their looks, Burston deemed it well to be upon his guard against any treachery on their part. This caution was needless, for they had less of the ruffian in their hearts than in their faces, and brought him safely enough across that valley, so rich by nature, but now so impoverished by the harsh policy of the Lords Marchers, which lies to the west of Turvey Castle.

Beside the river by which that valley is divided, they bade him "God-speed," and turned back on their homeward journey. The roadway leading to the water's edge on each side showed that the stream might be forded at this point; and beneath a clump of trees on the opposite bank, a number of armed men were loitering, or lay stretched on the grass, having evidently

been posted to defend or watch the passage. Breaking down a green branch, and waving it above his head, Burston rode into the ford; and as he did so, two of the Welshmen moved down to the brink to receive him when he should reach the farther side.

Brought by these men before the officer who commanded their party, Burston, with much difficulty, owing to the Welsh gentleman's small knowledge of English, gave him to understand his errand. Some refreshment was then offered, which, to the eye of the young envoy, reflected no great lustre upon either the hospitality or the resources of his hosts; after which, he was sent forward with an escort to the camp of Howel Goch.

It was near nightfall when he reached the head-quarters of the Welsh leader. The half-ruined castle of Llancoity, in which that chief had for the time being established himself, had been built in former days, in imitation and rivalry of those of the Norman invaders, by an ancestor of Howel Goch. From it that warlike prince of old times had led many a foray into the Lords Marchers' territories; and a large tree, known to the English as the "Gallows-oak," which stood at no great distance from the principal entrance, was famous as the place at which he was wont to execute every Englishman who was so unlucky as to fall into his hands. Since those days the castle had at one time been occupied, at another dismantled by the English; whilst the descendants of its founder had been driven from the fruitful district in which it was seated, to their more sterile possessions among the mountains. If Howel Goch emulated the spirit and deeds of his ancestors, he was, perhaps, not wholly inexcusable.

Burston's interview with this formidable chieftain was short, but to the point. The Welsh leader read quickly through the packet which was delivered to him, and then addressed the bearer in English, in some such words as these—"I am here assured by the valiant knight, Sir John Bigod, that he has, at my request, set at liberty his prisoner, my kinsman, Evan ap Griffith; and in return, I am to give to the bringer of the news such a horse as will bear him safely to his journey's end. Now, look you I am an honourable man, and shall keep my terms,

and so soon as I have certain knowledge that my kinsman has reached his own people, you shall mount yonder steed;" and he pointed to the "Gallows-oak." "It is a trusty one, that hath carried a hundred riders as good as thou art, and failed none of them ere he reached his journey's end."

Before Burston had time to expostulate, he found himself disarmed, bound, and dragged from the spot. That night, his lodging was in a secure, but somewhat dark and uncomfortable dungeon, beneath the chief tower of Llancoity.

To all appearance, Bigod had taken effectual means of ridding himself of his rival. Wholly cut off from friends and countrymen, and a doomed prisoner among a people, who, according to their own ancient saying, "loved hanging an Englishman more than their chief national dainty," Burston's plight was indeed a forlorn one.

X.—NEWS FROM THE MARCHES.

MISTRESS ALICE MASSENGER had, as we have seen, been accustomed in her earlier days to a somewhat quiet and uneventful life at Melcomb; but till now she had never felt the dreariness of it. Week after week passed, and still there was no news of her lover; whilst the knowledge of the more than common perils to which he was exposed, was a constant source of alarm to her.

At last there came a rumour—bruited about among the dependants at Melcomb, and said to have been derived from Hilworth—that Burston the falconer had been taken and hanged by the Welsh. This story, as it was brought by one of her maidens to Mistress Alice, was duly garnished with certain horrible particulars, after the usual manner of such reports; such as that the dead body had been cruelly mutilated, and the like. Alice knew not how much of this rumour to believe; and the good old esquire, when it was told to him, showed himself so much troubled, as to make it plain that he still kept his partiality

for his former favourite; indeed, he needed but little inciting on the part of his daughter to induce him to search out the source of the tale. It was found to have been spread by a sick follower of Bigod's, who had returned to his home.

This man was brought to Melcomb, but he could give no certain information in the matter. He had heard that Burston had been sent on some errand to the rebel camp; and he knew that the day on which he had himself left for Hilworth, it was the common talk of the garrison of Turvey Castle that the young man had been hanged. As to mutilation, the Welsh had ever behaved to the dead in such a manner as was a shame for any Christians to use, and it was like enough that Burston might have been so treated by them. This was all he could tell about the affair.

If there was much ground for fear, there was still some room for hope from this man's tidings, and this Alice Massenger often repeated to herself, as she watched in her mother's chamber, or walked in her pleasaunce; and yet she had so much looked for some such intelligence as this, that now, when it was actually come, she scarcely doubted of its truth. If she had before had little heart for her accustomed employments, she had still less now; through her round of daily duties she went as a matter of habit, but it was in vain that she tried to arouse herself to an interest in her old pleasures.

Yet for one of her old delights she still cared, and that was for her doves; for it was through them that she looked for the one thing she most desired, namely, for news from the Marches. Each day, as she fed her pretty flock, she looked for the well-remembered plumage of those which Father Oswald had carried away, and as she watched their fellows, longed for their return.

A week had wellnigh passed since the rumour of Giles Burston's death had reached Melcomb, and then, at last, one of the looked-for messengers came. The weary creature found its mistress at the accustomed spot, and alighted, tired out, upon her shoulder. Scarcely giving herself time to caress it, she untied, with trembling hands, the packet which it carried round

its neck. *(See Frontispiece.)* The writing was in the well-known hand of Father Oswald, and as Alice hastily read it, she burst into tears.

Whether her tears were those of sorrow or of joy, or whether in them she merely gave vent to overwrought feelings, we must not at this point of the story stay to enquire; before doing so, it will be necessary to return to Giles Burston, whom we left awaiting his execution in the dungeon of Llancoity.

XI.—THE HOUR OF NEED.

ALTHOUGH in the lodgings to which the hospitality of Howel Goch had consigned him the changes of day and night were not over perceptible, Burston was aware that noontide of the third day was drawing near, when he was summoned forth by his jailer. That official, who had probably been chosen for his post for his knowledge of English, was genial and talkative. "The young gentleman, Evan ap Griffith," he said, "had returned safe and sound to his kinsman, and so highly praised the usage he had had of Sir John Bigod, that Howel Goch, who loved to be behind no man in courtesy, desired to show his sense of the English captain's kindness by hanging his man at once."

Burston was accordingly hurried out of the castle, and towards the fatal tree, by a guard of Welsh soldiers, to whom any remonstrances, had he addressed them, would have been unintelligible: near to the oak, however, stood an officer who appeared to have charge of the whole proceeding, and to him the doomed man made such an appeal as he might for his life. He pleaded his inviolable character as an envoy; and urged that, though an inferior officer like Bigod might consent to his death, it would certainly be avenged by his commander, the just and powerful Earl Fitz-Turold. Burston besought the officer to represent this to Howel, but the Welshman only shook his head. "If your earl," he said, "takes vengeance for every Englishman hanged

by our chief, he will have enough to do; and one more or less will matter but little. You will have no mercy from Howel Goch; and therefore, young Saxon, you will do well to address your prayers elsewhere, and prepare to die."

"At least, then," said Burston, "you will grant me a priest?"

"Ay, truly," answered the Welshman, "if there be one at hand who can speak your tongue; but this gentleman" (pointing to the soldier who was adjusting the rope) "must not be kept waiting for all the priests in Christendom."

A considerable group of lookers-on had gathered round the party who guarded the prisoner. "The Englishman is in luck," observed one of them; "for here comes a priest of his own nation."

Burston turned his eyes in the direction indicated, and the sight which met them at once gave him some glimmering of hope: a man was approaching, clad in the clerical habit, who appeared to be somewhat aged, as he walked slowly, and leant upon a staff; but in this figure the keen eye of Giles Burston detected none other than Father Oswald. The priest no sooner joined the concourse of idlers, than he was pushed forward to shrive the condemned man.

The father looked round the group apparently in some astonishment; and then, addressing himself to the Welshman in command, inquired whether it were that officer's pleasure that he should do his function. Being answered in the affirmative, he requested that the nearest soldiers might stand back a little; "for," said he, "Holy Church ordains not that any should hear a shrift save the confessor and the confessed." As the prisoner's escape was apparently out of the question, the Welshmen at once fell back. "Kneel, my son, kneel," said Father Oswald; and Burston fell upon his knees.

"Be of good courage, my son," proceeded the father, in a low tone; "fear nothing, for help is at hand. We have but to keep these Welsh wolves quiet whilst a good horseman may ride a league; and then Fitz-Turold's lances shall teach them to howl to a proper tune. But now thou art in great peril of death, and must confess; yet do not overlook any of thy lesser sins

through overmuch haste, for we have time for a long shrift ere our riders can be here; and till they come it must not be finished."

Much in this spirit did Father Oswald proceed with his office, and went through the prescribed forms with so much deliberation as to draw murmurs from many of the lookers-on, and some impatient words from the officer. But Father Oswald was not to be put down. "My son," he said to the latter, "grudge not his last moments to a dying man, for who can tell how near thine own end may be."

And in truth the Welshman stood more nearly to death than he supposed; for at this instant the trampling of hoofs was heard, arms flashed in the sunlight, and some fifty horsemen came sweeping from behind the neighbouring covert in full career. Father Oswald seized the first moment of surprise to cut Burston's cords, and then laid about him lustily with his staff—a proceeding which his penitent seconded with the first weapon that came to his hand. The few Welshmen who stood on their defence were at once borne down by Fitz-Turold's lances; and almost in less time than the scene has taken to describe, the priest and Burston were mounted behind two of the horsemen, and the whole party was in full retreat from Llancoity, at a pace which rendered pursuit on the part of the ill-mounted Welsh little better than hopeless.

XII.—REVELATIONS.

ON the banks of the same stream which our young envoy had crossed three days previously, but at a point somewhat more to the south, he now saw with surprise, in the first pause of his flight, that a considerable army was encamped. Fitz-Turold had taken up a position there over-night, and was preparing to attack Howel Goch on the morrow. It was not till the shelter of this camp had been gained that Burston was able to express his gratitude to Father Oswald for the rescue in which he had taken

the chief part, and to inquire by what means he had been enabled to come so opportunely to his aid.

"The story is a long one," replied the priest; "but as we can now talk without the fear of Sir John Bigod before our eyes, I may tell it from beginning to end. Shortly then, my son, I had for many days past known of the knight's design against you; but he had given me to believe that he would not so soon have carried it out. I desired his treason against you to come to full bloom, that it might work his own punishment, but I meant it not to bear fruit; and indeed I had determined in my own mind that you should carry the letter given you for Howel Goch to Fitz-Turold, with another of mine own inditing, in which this treachery should have been made known to the earl."

"But in this," said Burston, "you failed through not being at Turvey Castle when I departed."

"Even so; and this was through Bigod's craft. Now when I returned, and found you gone, and knew well upon what errand, I was sore troubled; but I took counsel with myself, and got away as secretly as might be, and came with all speed to the earl, to whom I disclosed the whole matter."

"But," asked Burston, "would the Lord Marcher willingly lend an ear to aught against so famous a captain as Sir John Bigod?"

"Gilbert Fitz-Turold," answered Father Oswald, "knows me well. He loved my Lord of Lancaster, and was deep in his schemes for freeing England of the Despensers, though none had knowledge of it save my lord and a certain clerk that penned many weighty and secret things at his bidding. I was that clerk; and if I had been so minded, Fitz-Turold's head had made my peace with the king. Therefore the earl may well trust me. Now, when I told him how the son of the good knight, Sir Henry Brent——"

"It is as I thought, then," broke in the young man; "you knew my father?"

The priest smiled, and continued, "When I told him how the son of a good knight, remembered by him of old, had been betrayed to death among these barbarians, the earl swore by St.

Kenelm that Bigod should answer for it, though he were the best knight in the Marches, and that he would have you from among the Welsh if it cost him his earldom. I was for sending peaceably to Howel to demand you; but the earl, who knew his man, answered that if I cared to have your head without the body, the act would be a wise one, for we should assuredly get it for so doing.

"From that which I have seen of Howel Goch," said Giles Burston—or rather, as he must now be called, Giles Brent—"I am much of the earl's opinion."

"So instead," proceeded Father Oswald, "he led on his forces with all speed to this place; and when our spies brought word as to how and where you were to be hanged, he sent fifty of his best lances to bring you off. I could not be idle in the business, and being a man of peace, I could pass openly; so whilst our friends went far about, to draw near to Llancoity under covert, I came as quickly as I might, to keep the Welshmen in play till the proper time; and, thanks to the slovenly watch kept by the enemy, all went well."

"And now," said Brent, "I must needs ask you of another matter. For what cause is it that you care so deeply for my welfare, and that you have been ready to save my life at the peril of your own?"

"Truly, my son," answered the priest, "you had good right to have known this before; but I have hidden it, and have made myself as a stranger to you, that I might the better blind the eyes of Sir John Bigod. Know then, Giles Brent, that your father did me much kindness in old days, and brought me to the notice of his good lord and mine, the Earl of Lancaster, of whom I had fair preferment, and should have had better, but for the evil chance of Boroughbridge, which cost me a noble master and my hopes, and thee thy father and thy lands."

"Whatever kindness my father may have done," said the young man, "it has been nobly repaid to his child; but tell me, now, why did you desire that my name should be so carefully hidden from Bigod?"

"There was old enmity between him and thy father, and

therefore I warned thee. But enough of these matters, for I must now bring thee to the presence of the Lord Marcher, who will doubtless give thee fair occasion to-morrow, when he goeth forth against these Welshmen, to prove thyself thy father's son."

XIII.—SUNSHINE.

IT was four days after the above conversation took place that the winged post was despatched to Alice Massenger; for it was not till that time that Father Oswald returned to Turvey Castle; and of the events which took place in the interim, we can best gain a knowledge by referring to the letter which the good father indited for her benefit.

After assuring Alice of her lover's safety, and briefly telling her of his imprisonment and rescue, the missive proceeded somewhat in this strain :—"Afterward the Earl Fitz-Turold made war on this same Howel Goch, and took his fenced castle, Llancoity by name. There were, as I hear, many good deeds of arms done; and amongst others, the young esquire, Giles Brent, who was sometime called Burston, hath done valiantly. Nevertheless, Howel and his rabblement have for this time escaped us. And now I have that to tell which will touch thee nearly. When our soldiers drew near to take the castle, and came to a tree thereby, where execution was wont to be done, they found hanging on it the carcass of Sir John Bigod, whose death fell out in this manner. Word being brought him that the earl had sworn to send him a prisoner to the king, he forthwith fled to Llancoity, hoping there to have found good shelter; but, as it would seem (whether from the rarity of the thing, I know not), the having of an English knight in his hands is too sore a temptation to a Welshman to be withstood, and this Howel Goch incontinently hanged him."

To say that Alice Massenger rejoiced over the fall of Sir John Bigod would be to do her wrong; yet we may hope that the pity she felt for his unknightly fate was counterbalanced by

joy for her lover's safety; certain it is, that though she had still the chances of war to fear, after she had received this letter her dejection did not return.

Yet she had long to wait; and most part of the summer had gone by before the Welsh war was brought to its close. News of the final overthrow of Howel Goch was at last carried to Melcomb by a messenger of Earl Fitz-Turold's, who announced that his lord was now on his way to the king, and proposed to halt for a short space at Melcomb, as he desired to speak on certain matters of business with Master Massenger.

The arrival of such a guest as the Lord Marcher was no small event at Melcomb Manor; but by Alice it was chiefly valued on account of two persons who came in the earl's train, one of whom was Giles Brent, and the other Father Oswald. Fitz-Turold soon opened the real purpose of his visit. It was to commend to Master Massenger, as a suitor for his daughter's hand, the young esquire, Giles Brent, son of his sometime friend, the good knight, Sir Henry Brent. The youth, said the Lord Marcher, was the worthy son of a worthy sire, and had so far shown himself able and valiant in the late war, that he should himself look to his future preferment, and should make suit to the king for restoration of the forfeited lands of his father.

Doubtless, since he used such arguments, the earl was a pleader well fitted to gain his end; but whether his praises and promises, or the ancient esquire's partiality for his former favourite, most prevailed, I know not; certain it is, however, that before he rode on his way the old lord of Melcomb had given his consent to the union, and all things had been arranged as Father Oswald suggested, and as Giles Brent and Mistress Alice Massenger most desired.

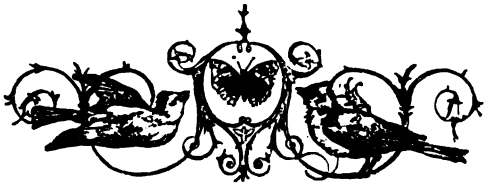
INTERLOGUE I.

IN this history of Mistress Alice Massenger I have shown in what manner the Brents came first to be lords of Melcomb; for it is to this Giles, and Alice his wife, that we trace our descent. I do not find that the Earl Fitz-Turold obtained restitution of the lands of Sir Henry Brent, which had, it seems, been otherwise granted; but it is recorded that instead of them he gained from the king a grant of certain lands in Herefordshire, which were afterwards exchanged for others adjoining to the Manor of Melcomb. So that this Giles became a man of good estate and account, as is made manifest from a patent under the hand of King Edward the Third, empowering him to fortify his house at Melcomb, and to empark certain lands there; of which last permission only he would seem to have availed himself.

He left a numerous issue, both of sons and daughters; but during the two next generations I meet with nothing worthy of being made the subject of a special history; yet, touching the life of Isabel, eldest daughter of Henry, grandson of the above Giles Brent, certain matters are told, which have been handed down as one of the most remarkable of our family traditions.

The Henry Brent spoken of had many children, of whom Isabel was the eldest: she is said to have been a maiden of great beauty, but to have been proud and nothing gentle in her disposition. In his household also, in some part, was brought up one Gilbert Brent, the son of a deceased kinsman of his, who

was but little younger than the above-named Isabel. This youth, being but of slender patrimony and of quick parts, was bred a scholar at Oxford, where his learning was, for his years, much commended. It had been supposed that he would in due time enter upon the priesthood; but about the time that he attained to manhood he showed no desire towards this course of life, and that for some cause not manifest to his kinsman, choosing rather to betake himself to one of the Inns of Court. As the ensuing history is narrated, his motives for doing so will probably become known to the reader, as will also somewhat of the course of his after life; for his story and that of his cousin Isabel are closely but unhappily linked together.



THE GREEN HUNTSMAN.

I.—AFLOAT.

"TO-MORROW, then, my clerkly kinsman, you will leave us, and in this gay and wondrous London to which you are going, you will forget the homely faces of the homely folk at Melcomb."

These words were spoken by Isabel Brent, as she leaned backwards on the cushions of the boat in which her kinsman Gilbert was rowing her, and as she glided among the lilies of the smooth stream which flows past Melcomb Park.

"Did I then forget you, or Melcomb, at Oxford?" he asked.

"At Oxford; oh no! Why should you? You could have seen nothing there but books and boys. But in London, where all the fairest ladies in the land gather round King Henry's court, you will find more weighty reasons for forgetting us."

"It may be that the fair ladies of the Court will not often meet the eyes of a poor scholar of Clement's Inn; and yet, even though I could win the favour of the greatest and brightest there, none would be so fair, to my thoughts, as one face that I had left behind me at Melcomb, Cousin Isabel."

Gilbert Brent uttered these words with an air of great seriousness, which only provoked a laugh from his companion. "Were it not that all men do the same thing," she said, "I should have deemed that you scholars learned such pretty

speeches as this from your books, so ready are they at your tongues' ends, and so much are they alike. We maidens, Sir Clerk, are weary of them; so prithee, gentle kinsman, leave these idle conceits, and talk more wisely."

"Cousin Isabel," said the youth, suddenly resting on his oars, "how long will you study to vex me thus? A hundred times you have done it; you have led me on as though you would have had me say everything that I longed to say, and then, when you saw me about to speak, you have thrust me back with some such jesting words as these; and hitherto your pleasure has been law to me, and I have been silenced."

There was an impetuosity, and a determination too, about the young man's manner, which was quite new to Isabel; yet she answered nothing, but, looking over the side of the boat, let one end of her green mantle fall almost to the water, and professed to be amusing herself by seeing how nearly it might approach the surface without touching it.

"Isabel," he went on, "you bid me make no idle speeches, and I will make none; what I have to say is in sober earnest, and I will not be silenced."

He paused, but Isabel made no reply; only, instead of playing with her drapery, she now sat quite still, with her eyes fixed upon her folded hands; so he spoke on.

"In your waywardness you have ever treated me as though I had been only a thing to toy with, like your bracket or your bird, and I have always worshipped you with some sort of awe, and have been silent when you bade me; and yet, you must know, Isabel Brent—you cannot but know it—that all this time I have loved you with a deeper love than words can utter."

Still she made no answer, either by word or sign, but sat motionless, with clasped hands and downcast eyes. The young scholar gazed eagerly on her as she sat there, with her head bent forward, her eyes hidden by their long lashes, and her rich hair moving gently in the light wind that played along the stream, and thought that there could be no beauty to compare with hers.

"Isabel," he said, "it is long now since my love for you,

unspoken as it was, has been the constant thought and the one motive of my life. It has made me thrust aside my earliest hopes, and has changed the whole course of my career. With your favour, I shall be strong, and do bravely in the world; without it, I shall have no object, and shall waste my life. It is with such a love that I regard you; and will you not then say that you can give me some little love in return?"

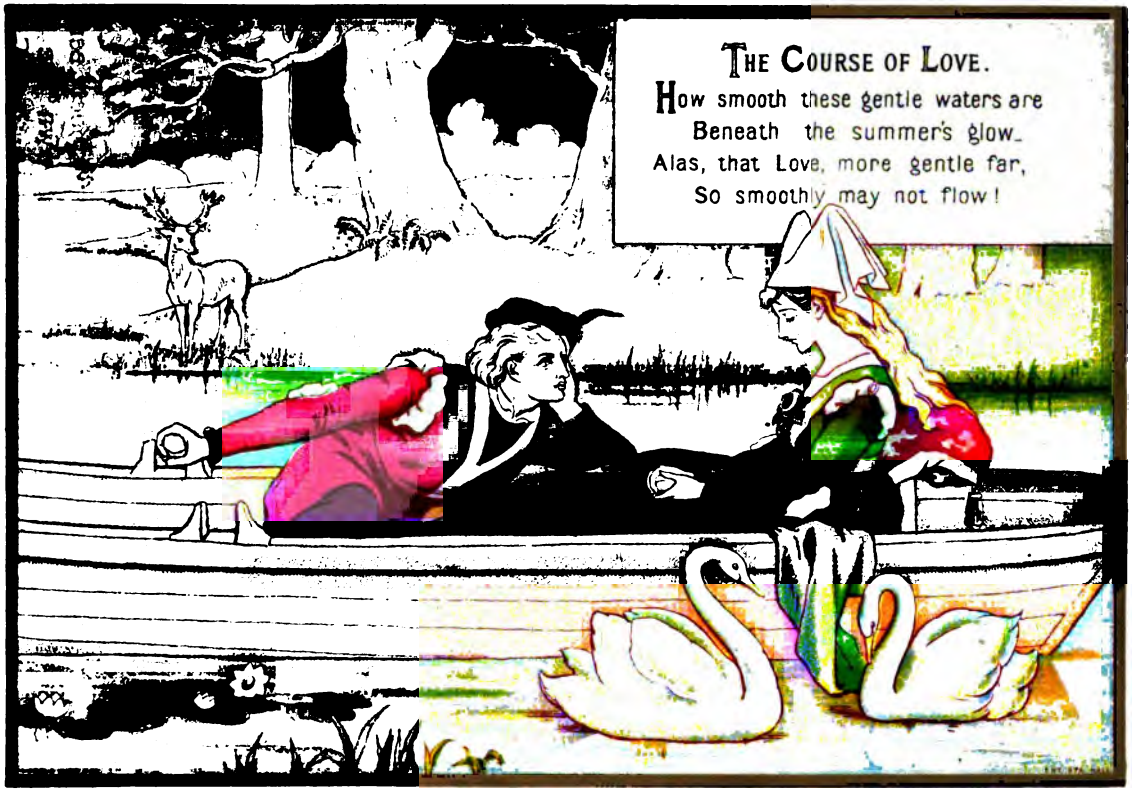
Gilbert spoke passionately, and many maidens in Isabel's place would have been moved, perhaps to tears. Isabel Brent, however, did not weep, for she was not a damsel subject to that weakness. It may be that she was touched, but she did not show it; she only looked downwards as before, and was still silent.

"To-morrow," he continued, "I leave Melcomb to begin my new life in London. I have told you all that my love is for you, all that your love might be to me, and will you then drive me away hopeless; for all that I bear towards you will you give me no love in return?"

There was a slight pause, and then, raising her eyes till they had almost, but not quite, reached the level of his own, she said, in a low calm voice, "Perhaps I may—a little."

Had Gilbert been anywhere but in a boat, he would have sprung up and thrown his arms round her; indeed, as it was, he had almost upset the frail craft in the impulse to do so, before he recollected himself, or could submit to take his happiness in a more tranquil manner. True, Gilbert Brent was a man of no mean natural judgment, and he had seen enough of his cousin to know that there was much in her disposition which was not amiable; but what was that to him? Was she not, to his thinking, the most beautiful of all living beings, and was not he in love? Had she not favoured his suit, and had he not therefore good right to be happy?

It will be needless to recount all that passed between the cousins whilst the boat was slowly floating down the river towards Melcomb. With a heart full of his new joy, Gilbert said many things. Isabel spoke but few words; she was not under the influence of so strong an emotion as that by which he


THE COURSE OF LOVE.
How smooth these gentle waters are
Beneath the summer's glow.
Alas, that Love, more gentle far,
So smoothly may not flow!

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was moved, yet the language of love and adoration made pleasant music to her ears.

"It were well," said Gilbert, as they left the boat—"it were well, sweetest cousin, that I should tell my kinsman of the troth that has been plighted between us, ere I depart."

"Nay," answered Isabel, "it were better as yet that this should be known to ourselves alone."

II.—A COURT GALLANT.

ON the morrow Gilbert Brent took leave of Melcomb; and as in those days, far more than in the present, a journey to or from London was a matter of toil and danger, and not lightly to be undertaken, many months must pass by before we shall again see him at the home of his ancestors.

Meanwhile, at such rare opportunities as offered themselves, he wrote letters to Mistress Isabel, in which, with many loving words, he set forth his constancy towards her, and spoke with much longing of the time when he should see her again. In answer to these, Isabel at first sent other billets to the same purpose, only more brief and less warm; but after a time there came a change, arising from certain causes of which I have now to speak.

About the spring-time following that summer in which Gilbert Brent had left Melcomb, there came to the neighbouring house of Hilworth a young gallant, sister's son to the then lord of that place, and Piers Oversley by name. This young gentleman, who might be some six-and-twenty years of age, was of comely person; and having been from his youth engaged about the court, he had the gay and chivalrous bearing which befitted his breeding. He gave out that he was wearied of the life of pleasure which he had led, and that he desired to refresh himself for a time in the quiet of his kinsman's home: some, however, there were ready to aver that he had taken part too freely in the wild doings of Prince Henry, with his comrades, Sir John

Falstaff and Master Poins; and that he came to Hilworth to be for a time from under the eye of my Lord Chief-Justice, Sir William Gascoigne.

He had not long been at Hilworth before he met with Mistress Isabel Brent, and that through an adventure well calculated to give him an interest and favour in her eyes. Isabel, as we have seen, loved the river, and one day in the May-time she desired to be rowed up the stream. Two of her younger sisters, then but children, went with her, and their attendant was Ralph Gurton, the ranger of the park—a man whom she chose before all others, because to him and to his wife Barbara, who had been her nurse, she was exceedingly partial, and because they on their part were especially devoted to her.

It was one of those warm and sunny days which so rarely occur in May, but which, when they do come, are the most delicious of the whole year. Scarcely a breeze stirred to ruffle the water; the banks were gay with their fresh new green, and bright with flowers; whilst the birds sang sweetly from every bush and tree. Undoubtedly, as the boat passed point after point, and glided along through windings of the stream unvisited by her since the memorable day on which she had last been rowed by her cousin Gilbert, Isabel's thoughts reverted to him; yet, at the same time, it may safely be affirmed that her lover occupied a far less prominent place in her mind than the bright sunshine, or the smiling landscape around her. Was it not natural that it should be so? He had now been absent from her for many months, and her kindly feelings towards him had never amounted to anything like an absorbing passion, such as was his for her.

Close to the river's brink, upon the Hilworth side, stood a thick clump of trees, and beneath them grew a mass of gaily-coloured blossoms, which attracted the attention of the children. Isabel desired Gurton to pull to the bank, that some of these flowers might be gathered. The stout yeoman, to whom every wish of his young mistress had the weight of law, at once obeyed; but he did so in vain, for the coveted treasures were found to be still beyond the reach of the impatient girls.

Determined that his young ladies should not be disappointed of their wish, the ranger stepped on shore, and soon returned with an abundance of posies; but in their haste to secure them, at the moment he was again attempting to take his place in the boat, his careless mistresses allowed it to slip from the bank, and so plunged the unlucky Ralph in the water.

At the spot where this accident happened, Gurton might easily have scrambled up the bank, had it occurred to him to have done so; but unfortunately, in the confusion of the moment, he retained his hold on the boat's side, and was thus carried away from the shore. However, he quickly recollected himself, and seeing that his weight was in danger of causing the craft to capsize, at last let it go; but he was now in deep water, and in great peril of his life, and floundered helplessly in the stream, to the no small alarm of Isabel and her little sisters.

Fortunately there was succour at hand. Before he had time to become exhausted, a young and gallant-looking gentleman, who, unseen by the occupants of the boat, had been walking among the trees, strode quickly forward, and breaking down the long, straight branch of a willow, flung its end to the sinking man. Gurton grasped it, and Piers Oversley, for he it was, without any apparent exertion or unwonted hurry, drew both branch and man safely ashore.

Beyond imbibing more cold water than had passed his lips for many a year past, the honest ranger was none the worse for his bath, and Isabel steered the boat to the shore to take him in. When she did so, the gallant, with a courteous air, expressed his fears that after so narrow an escape her boatman might not be able to fulfil his duties, and prayed her permission to take his place; a proposal which Mistress Isabel at once declined, but at the same time she thanked him warmly for the services he had rendered. Ralph Gurton was not deficient in gratitude, but just at the moment he had little spare wind for conversation. Nevertheless, before the boat was finally shoved off, he found voice to say to the gallant esquire, whose name and condition were well known to him, "Master Oversley, you have done a right good service to a true yeoman, and be sure of this, that

whenever the chance befalls, Ralph Gurton will not fail to do you yeoman's service in return."

The ranger was not a man given to making rash promises, but such promises as he made he was never known to break.

III.—A NEW LOVE.

BRAVELY equipped with the fopperies of the age, though not to excess—for he had much judgment in such light matters—Master Piers Oversley presented himself next day at Melcomb. He had ridden thither, he said, in the fear that Mistress Isabel Brent and her sisters might have suffered by the misadventure of yesterday, and had held it his devoir to make enquiries with regard to them. I have said that on the foregoing day he had made a favourable impression upon Isabel, and assuredly that impression was increased and strengthened at this their second meeting. It seemed to her that in many respects he compared favourably with her absent cousin. The graceful manners and manly bearing of the courtier of twenty-six were not unnaturally pleasing in her eyes, when she contrasted them with those of the half-formed scholar of twenty, and when it is considered that in stature, and in comeliness of face and person, the more mature gallant was no whit the least attractive of the two.

The long absence of Gilbert Brent also had tended to weaken any little tenderness which Isabel might have felt towards him; it had never been any very perfect sympathy; and now, without much violent mental conflict, she turned a willing ear to the courtly compliments of his more splendid rival.

For that a rival he was, was soon made evident. He had, after his manner, fallen in love with Isabel at first sight; not with a deep, strong, unselfish passion like that of Gilbert—to a man of his character and training that would have been an impossibility—but still with a love which was perfectly genuine so far as it went. That is to say, he was full of admiration for

her as the most beautiful maiden he had seen in the neighbourhood of Hilworth; and he conceived that there was no pursuit in which he could engage with so much enjoyment during his forced retirement, as laying siege to her heart. Such were his feelings at their first meeting; but perhaps we shall see that, as he follows the chase, he will become more seriously interested in this pursuit than he had at first intended or imagined possible.

Piers Oversley soon became a frequent visitor at Melcomb. At first, and whilst he came as a mere ordinary guest, he received a hearty welcome from the hospitable esquire and Dame Margaret Brent; but no sooner did the object of his visits become manifest, than there was, in this respect, a complete change. Whether the worthy lord of Melcomb did or did not believe in the tales told to Oversley's discredit, I cannot say, nor whether, even if he did, he considered them as serious matters of objection; but it is certain that this fine town gallant was by no means the husband he desired for his daughter Isabel.

A plain, worthy gentleman was this Henry Brent, who, though he was esteemed a man of good judgment in his own proper affairs and those of his neighbours, cared little for public business or great men, and who desired nothing so much as to stand well among his own people. That his eldest daughter should be wedded to some neighbouring gentleman of his own standing, was a point upon which he had altogether set his heart. Had he ever thought of his poor kinsman, Gilbert Brent, as a suitor for her hand, it would have vexed him sorely; but this dainty courtier, with his fine airs, was far worse, and not to be endured; he determined to be rid of him at once.

By the time, however, that he had formed this resolution, the affair had proceeded much farther than he had supposed, and Piers Oversley had become really in earnest. Explanations followed, in which the gallant exerted himself to the utmost to gain over Master Brent to his wishes; but it was in vain that he urged his own brilliant prospects, and the advantageous position which the daughter of his host might hope to attain by the match; the lord of Melcomb was not a man to change from resolutions once formed; and, as the upshot of the interview,

Oversley learned that the doors of Melcomb would in future be closed against him.

But a repulse of this nature, far from crushing the hopes of the adventurous courtier, only incited him to follow his quest with still greater eagerness. He had reason for knowing that there was no aversion to himself on the part of Mistress Isabel, and since he could not woo and win her openly, he would do so in secret. He looked round him for some agent through whom he might safely and privately communicate with her, and at this juncture thought of Ralph Gurton.

On the evening which followed his unsuccessful interview with Brent, therefore, to Gurton's cottage he took his way. The ranger lived quite on the outskirts of the park, and by choosing the hour of twilight in which to seek him, and by well drawing his hood about his face, Oversley doubted not but that he should escape, as for obvious reasons he wished to do, the observation of any of the family or dependants of Melcomb.

With Ralph Gurton the reader has already some acquaintance. He was a sturdy yeoman, slightly past the middle age, and of an upright, determined, but somewhat stolid character. He was sitting within, fitting his cross-bow with a new string, whilst Barbara was busy with her spinning-wheel, when Oversley knocked at the door. The rough voice of the ranger bade his unknown guest "lift the latch and enter;" the visitor, however, chose rather to open the door but a hand-breadth's space, and to summon Gurton forth to speak with him. Thus bidden, honest Ralph rose and went out.

"It is I," said the gallant, "Piers Oversley; I have somewhat to say to you, and the matter is for your ears alone."

"Say on then, noble sir, you need fear no eaves-droppers; for, save Barbara's and our own, there are no ears within many a bowshot of this place."

"It is well, then; we will pace under these trees. Listen, Ralph Gurton; you are a man who may be trusted, I shall speak with you frankly: you owe me some service——"

"And am ready to pay my debts, Master Oversley," chimed in the ranger. "I had been a drowned man but for you; and,

saving my duty to my master and my master's house, whatever I can do is at your command."

"I doubt it not; and, therefore, I speak freely to you of things that I would name to no other man. Look you, your young mistress and I would fain wed each other, but I am hated by her father, and shall be no more suffered to enter his house. What I ask of you is this, that you should find means whereby we may send to each other, and, if need be, meet."

The ranger drew his hand across his forehead, and paused before he answered. "Master Oversley," he said, "in doing this, I should be doing false and evil service to my lord."

"For a time he might think so," replied the gallant; "but in the end you would do him better service than he is willing to do himself, for you will help his daughter to a better match than he will ever fashion for her."

"This may well be as you say," said Ralph; "yet it seems that I may lose my master's good opinion in the meanwhile, and that I were loth to risk."

"You do well to consider your master," was the answer; "but you must think of your young mistress also. Remember that Mistress Isabel's will is wholly set upon this matter; and if no way of forwarding it be found, she will be heart-broken, and pine away, Ralph Gurton."

"The saints forbid, the saints forbid!" said the honest ranger; and then, as though struck by a happy thought, he added, "Since this is a business which mainly concerns Mistress Isabel, why should we stand here talking of it in the dark? Come into my cottage, noble sir; you may trust Barbara to the death in aught that concerns her young mistress, whom she loves more than she would have loved our own child, if—Heaven rest it!—it had lived. If anything is to be done in this matter, you may trust her woman's wit for carrying it through."

Gurton was in the right; for no sooner had the case been laid open to Barbara, than she at once found arguments to overpower her husband's objections. Barbara was not troubled with unnecessary scruples herself, and she was accustomed to lead, and to mark out a way for her slower helpmate. To her there

was no higher ideal of duty than pleasing her young mistress, and beyond this, the prospect of bearing part in an intrigue was too captivating an idea to be resisted. Thus it was that Oversley obtained promises of active assistance and perfect secrecy.

Before the gallant left the cottage, he pressed a golden angel into Barbara's unresisting palm; and as the ranger bade him "God speed" at the door, he would fain have given to him a like proof of his generosity; but worthy Ralph would none of it. "No, no, Master Oversley," he said; "I am your debtor, and in what I shall do for you, I shall seek to pay off the kindness you have done to me: I ask not for your money. If I, being a poor man, suffer loss of place in your service, then I shall look to your nobleness to provide for me. Beyond this, I ask for nothing;" and with these words, the ranger turned back into his house.

IV.—THE OLD LOVE.

GREAT part of a year had gone by since Gilbert Brent had left Melcomb. For some time past his few packets from Isabel, brief and far apart as they were, had been so cold and distant as greatly to trouble him; but the crowning point was now put to his distress by a letter which he received from her. In this document she calmly gave him to understand that for many reasons it was impossible that they should ever be united, and that they must forget that troth had ever been plighted between them. Upon this decision of hers he was to look as final and irrevocable, and any attempt on his part to renew their intercourse as lovers would provoke her deepest displeasure. Above all things, she insisted that he should not as yet think of visiting Melcomb. After awhile, when both of them could look with indifference on the childish folly of which they had been guilty, not one of all her kindred should she welcome with so much joy as Gilbert; but at present, his appearance there would be an offence which she could never forgive.

To the misery caused by this epistle was added no small degree of perplexity as to what course it was best to pursue. Gilbert Brent's was a deep and strong nature, and he was not given to change through mere absence or lapse of time. His love was to him the better part of his existence, and death would have been easier than renouncing it. He must shake her resolution, but to do so he must see her, and to see her he must at once go to Melcomb. Her displeasure would have to be braved; but no matter, it was his only hope. He would set out at once.

Accordingly, to Melcomb he came. His arrival was, of course, wholly unlooked for. The esquire was from home, but from Dame Margaret he received the same kind and motherly greeting as of old; from which he inferred that Isabel's letter was not written with the knowledge of her parents. Uncertain as he was of the nature of his reception, he was most impatient to meet with his cousin; and when he heard that she was alone in the pleasaunce, he hurried out to seek her.

Since the days of Hugh Massenger, the old manor-house at Melcomb had in many ways been enlarged and altered, but the pleasaunce still remained as it had ever been. Isabel Brent was now taking the air in the same quaint and dainty paradise, bordered by the same trim hedges of clipped yew, as that in which we have seen her ancestress moving among her doves well-nigh a century before; but, alas! the daughter of the house of Melcomb who now walked there was a far different maiden to the simple and gentle Alice Massenger.

When Gilbert entered the enclosure, he saw that Isabel was trifling with the flowers at the farther end, but she gave no sign that she was aware of his presence. Presently she turned and moved slowly towards the house, but Gilbert was still apparently unobserved. Gathering a rose, he stepped forward to meet her, and with doffed cap, bending on his knee, he proffered his rose. His graceful gallantry was thrown away; without deigning him word or look, she swept past. "Isabel!" he cried; "sweetest Cousin Isabel, for old kindness' sake do not use me thus!" But she had passed into the house, and was gone.

Gilbert had looked for no very gentle reception; he had

expected that certain reproachful speeches would have to be borne before he could make his peace with his cousin; but to be ignored in this manner was more than he had calculated upon, and his temper was sorely ruffled. Crushing the unlucky rose between his hands, he strode from the pleasaunce across the park, and deep into the wood.

He did so almost involuntarily, yet he could not have done a wiser thing. It gave him time for enough solitary reflection to bring conviction that anger against his cousin was worse than folly. A reconciliation was the one thing he had to live for, and an angry altercation with her at this juncture would ruin his hopes for ever. He would be calm, patient, moderate, and give her no grounds on which to fix a quarrel. Doubtless she would try to avoid speaking with him in private, but he would watch his occasion, and by some means or other gain an interview; then he would soothe her, would overcome her objections, and woo her anew. In the end, all would yet be well.

In this mood he returned to the house.

V.—THE STONE HUNTING LODGE.

THE opportunity which our scholar had promised himself did not occur that day, nor the next. He saw Isabel, indeed, before the other members of the family, in whose presence she was simply cold and distant; but she took care that he should never meet her alone.

The third day was far advanced when his kinsman suggested that they should walk to see his newly-made fish-ponds. Gilbert assented, and they strolled down towards the river, from which the recently-formed stews were to be supplied by a sluice. They had almost reached the point of interest, when the young lawyer turned, and happened to cast his eyes on the rising ground which sloped upwards on the opposite side of the house. A solitary female figure was climbing the brow of the hill, and this figure must be Isabel, for on this point his eyes could not deceive him;

THE ROSE.

OH, DAINTY ROSE, most fair, meet for my love to wear,
Therefore, for her sweet sake, do I so cherish thee!
She scorns thee? Then let fall thy painted petals all,
Thou hast no more perfume, no more bright hues for me.

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another moment, and she was lost among the thick trees which crowned the bank.

"She must have watched us leave the house," he thought, "and then set out at once. She is gone to the favourite haunt of her girlhood, the Old Stone Hunting Lodge, and now is the time when I may speak to her without interruption." Saying this to himself, he made some trifling excuse to his kinsman, and set off at a rapid pace towards the hill.

The trees covering the summit of the ridge among which Isabel had disappeared formed the outskirt of Melcomb Wood, and a little beyond them was a hollow, the level bottom of which, though surrounded by thick woodland, was, for the space of about a rood, open and grassy. In the midst of this sylvan dell an abundant spring of fair water bubbled up, and then flowed down a stony channel to be lost in the thicket. On a slight elevation above the spring and its surrounding green sward, stood the sequestered building already alluded to.

The Old Stone Hunting Lodge had been originally built by Giles Brent, shortly after he had emparked Melcomb Wood and the surrounding lands; and by him both it and the neighbouring well had been sportively dedicated to St. Eustace. He had built it that he might, in this secluded place, listen to the belling of his harts, a sound in which he took great delight; but since his day it had seldom been frequented by his descendants, except for the sake of occasional shelter when hunting or fowling, and hence, instead of St. Eustace Lodge, it had gained its present name.

Although of small size—for twenty paces would have girthed it round—it was, like most works of that day, curiously built and ornamented, after the fashion of what those studious of architecture have, from its want of classical simplicity and beauty, aptly termed "Gothic;" and was, therefore, to us who have the advantage of an acquaintance with the noble works of the ancients, a building worthy only of contempt; although I understand that Mr. Gray, the poet, and his friend Mr. Horace Walpole, have the singular taste to admire, and the latter even to imitate, such efforts of an unpolished age.

This lodge was of an eight-sided shape; four of the walls were pierced by arches, one of which contained the door, whilst the other three were filled with quarries of fair glass; and in the four walls which alternated with these, similar arches formed, as it were, large panels, which had been filled with figures of men, horses, dogs, and deer, painted, after the barbarous fashion of the age, from the legend of St. Eustace; but these had been greatly defaced by time. The roof overhead was of stone, and curiously fretted; whilst round the walls ran a range of stone benches, on which those who loved such cold and hard seats might lie or sit at their ease.

From the top of the hill towards Melcomb the roof of this building might plainly be seen, through the tree-tops, lying less than half a bowshot below; but to reach it from thence, owing to the steepness of the descent, a winding pathway of some length had to be taken. Gilbert had hastily climbed the bank, and would have hurried down at still greater speed, had he met with no hindrance; but much to his vexation, just at this very point, he met with the ranger, Ralph Gurton.

The worthy Ralph was loitering among the trees, cross-bow in hand, and apparently on the look-out for his old enemies, the kites and polecats. Gilbert would fain have avoided him, but this was out of the question; for the ranger, though not usually garrulous, seemed on this occasion so bent on talking, that one might almost have suspected him of an express design to delay the scholar's progress. Gilbert began to fear that he should have to hear reports on the health and prosperity of all the animals under Gurton's charge, from deer downwards; and writhing under the infliction, was about to burst away abruptly, on the plea that he must hasten to the Old Lodge, when the ranger exclaimed suddenly, "Ha, are you there, my master!" and, levelling his cross-bow, discharged it. "A bad shot, a bad shot!" he said, a moment afterwards. "'Twas a windhover on the roof of the lodge yonder, but I missed her."

Gilbert had looked in the direction of the shot, but possibly his eyes were less keen than those of the ranger, for no bird had been seen by him at the place indicated.

VI.—PARLEY.

GILBERT had not erred in his conjecture. It was Isabel he had seen on the hill, and she was bound for the Old Stone Hunting Lodge. But it was not that she might indulge in solitary sorrow that she went there; the lodge had already an occupant. As she entered, Master Piers Oversley came forward, and, bending gaily on one knee, kissed her hand. "Most sweet Mistress Isabel," he said, "in obedience to the mandate brought by your trusty Mercury, I was at this place two hours before sunset. Save that I had the flames of love to warm me, I should have suffered much from cold in this chilly vault, and the time which ever seems long when I wait for you, seemed as though it would never pass by."

"Patience is a virtue much to be commended in lovers," answered the lady; "yet I had kept my time had all been well. But my loving and much-misused cousin, of whom I have told you, is now at Melcomb, and I had little will for him to see me come hither."

"Nay, fair lady, seek not for excuses; your coming has now richly rewarded my virtue of patience. No harm shall come of the delay, unless, indeed, it may have wearied our valiant sentinel, and caused him to leave his post."

"Fear not for that," replied Isabel; "the trusty Ralph is still on guard, and now truly we shall need him more than ever. This bookish stripling is ever on the watch to follow and speak with me, a thing which I most study to avoid. Would he were anywhere but at Melcomb!"

"Nay, be not angry with the youngling, fair Mistress Isabel. Schoolboys are ever troublesome unless they are chastised; and as for this one, if he is too forward, I shall take upon myself to correct him."

"And if he invite the rod, I shall not be the fond kinswoman to shield him from punishment," said Isabel, with a laugh.

"He shall be well whipped," continued he, "and with his whipping we will send the truant away; for he wastes our golden

moments, fair Mistress Isabel, in which we might well speak of better matters, and chiefly as to our flight. I have appointed all things needful for it."

"Scarcely so, Master Piers Oversley, since you have as yet to gain my consent thereto."

"As to that, I shall ask it in so winning a manner," said the gallant, bending forward and giving a delicate salute to her lips, "that I doubt not of obtaining it. Then, as I said, all things needful are appointed, and—— But how now, what is this?"

At that instant something struck the roof of the lodge sharply.

"'Tis Gurton's signal; someone comes this way," said Isabel.

"Without doubt 'twas his cross-bow bolt, and we must part before we have fairly spoken," answered Oversley. "A thousand sorrows light on the intruder!"

"Spare your maledictions," she said, "or rather change them for farewells, for you must at once away."

"Too true, sweet Mistress Isabel, and so adieu."

In another instant he had disappeared in the wood.

He had scarcely passed from sight, when Gilbert Brent descended into the dell, and approached the lodge. "I was right," he thought, as he observed that the door stood partially open, "Isabel is here;" and then, slightly tapping before he entered, but without waiting for any response, he passed in.

Isabel was sitting, with her hands before her face, on one of the stone benches. He supposed at first that she had been weeping; but when she removed her hands, no traces of tears were to be seen. Knowing, as he did, that he was forcing his unwelcome presence upon the maiden whom he most desired to conciliate, he paused for a moment to consider in what words it were best to address her; but his hesitation was needless. Now she was fairly brought to bay, Isabel Brent was not one to shrink from the position; she turned upon him at once.

"I came hither," she said, "because I desired to be alone; this intrusion is another proof of the regard you have for my wishes, Master Gilbert Brent."

"Cousin Isabel," he answered, in a gentle tone, "I have indeed followed you to this place, and, as you say, knowing that

my presence was undesired; but, Isabel, my love for you has driven me to this discourtesy, and for that and for old kindness' sake you must pardon me."

"Talk not to me of love," said she, sharply; "true love is loyal and obeys, but you seek only to cross and thwart me!"

"Not so, Cousin Isabel; I only seek to win your goodwill. I have ridden a hundred miles to ask forgiveness for any fault I may have committed, and now, is it generous of you to deny me a hearing?"

"And what good," she answered, "should come of my hearing you? It would be but opening old griefs anew. I have told you already that our childish love-making must be forgotten. I have told you that this was my resolution, and that it could not be changed. And I have told you in a manner not to be mistaken. After this you have no right to force yourself into my presence."

"Isabel," said Gilbert, "you speak to me in anger. If I had shown myself so careless of you as to renounce you without an effort, you would have had good cause for your indignation. I have only proved the depth of my love for you; you must not, cannot, be angry with me for this."

"And if not, have I much cause to be pleased with you otherwise? Did I not charge you above all things not to present yourself at Melcomb at this unhappy moment, and how have you kept my charge?"

"Hear me, cousin," said Gilbert; "I have no wish to defend myself at the cost of a dispute with you. I came to Melcomb, as I came to this lodge to-day, because I must speak with you, because I cannot give you up, because you and your love are more to me than my life. How could I tell you this, how could I force you to believe me in earnest, without seeing you? As the saints are above us, dearest Isabel, I desire not to vex you; I wish only to lay open my whole heart before you, to discover and remove whatever cause of bitterness you may have against me, and to win once more such a promise of your love as I received when we plighted our troth among the lilies of yonder stream."

As Gilbert was passionately uttering these words, he thought he saw some traces of tenderness, some signs of rising tears, in Isabel's eyes; but as he ended, he observed her looking with such a startled expression towards one of the windows, as to cause him involuntarily to turn his eyes in the same direction. The shades of evening fell early in that deep woodland hollow, and the twilight was already darkening the lodge, yet he could not be mistaken; the face of a man was looking in upon them through the broken quarries.

He stepped forward, but the apparition had disappeared; he sprang to the door and looked round, but the dim solitary dell was as quiet as though it had never been crossed by human footstep.

"Saw you nothing?" he asked, as he returned to his cousin.

"Something passed the window," she answered in a cold tone, "but I saw nothing distinctly; it may have been an owl."

"I cannot have been deceived," said Gilbert; "what I saw was plainly a face, a man's face."

"Quite likely," she replied in the same uninterested manner; "and if so, it was doubtless that of Ralph; he has charge to watch over my solitary walks."

"It was not Ralph," was the reply; "but it is gone, and let it pass;" and with that Gilbert endeavoured to return to that point of the conversation at which the interruption had occurred.

"And now," he said, "dear Cousin Isabel, you must tell me by what fault I drew upon myself the letter which has caused all this wretchedness. I ask for no revelations which may affect you; I only ask to know what I have done amiss that I may amend it, and again gain your goodwill as of old."

But all the tenderness had passed from Isabel's eyes now. "I charge you with no faults," she said in a hard tone as she rose from her seat; "and I offer no explanations. We will waste no more idle words here; suffice it that you and I can never be lovers again. Once more I freely resign the troth you gave; restore me mine."

"Isabel! Isabel!" he cried; "you ask an impossibility. I cannot renounce you."

"Give me back my troth," she continued, moving towards the door, "and we will be friends; refuse me—cross me, and I shall be your enemy."

"I cannot give you back your troth," he gasped. "I cannot lie to you, and say I will not love you. I must and will while I have life!"

"Then we shall not be friends," she said, and left him alone in the lodge.

VII.—WAR DECLARED.

ISABEL'S declaration of war was no empty threat. If during her conversation with her cousin she had ever, as he imagined, in any degree softened towards him, it was but a momentary emotion, to be soon replaced by redoubled bitterness at the obstinacy which he afterwards showed. Far from being flattered by his unswerving devotion towards her, she was annoyed at what she looked upon as his perverse persistency; partly, perhaps, because he was himself by this time grown hateful to her, and partly because she feared that he might arouse the jealousy of Piers Oversley, and prove a means of separating her from the man on whom she had now set her heart. In some way or other she was determined to shake him off.

Of the love passages which had occurred between his daughter and his kinsman, the lord of Melcomb had, as we have seen, known nothing. He was therefore greatly surprised when, on the morning which followed the meeting at the Stone Hunting Lodge, Isabel related the whole matter to him, with much apparent frankness, expressing, at the same time, the deepest contrition for her own folly, and asking for his protection from any future persecutions on the part of her cousin Gilbert.

An hour later the scholar was summoned to his kinsman's presence, and charged by him with the offence of clandestinely making love to his daughter. That Gilbert's conduct had been in any way underhand in the matter was not, as has been shown,

his own fault; but this he could not assert without throwing blame on Isabel, and he could not therefore clear his own character as he might otherwise have done; whilst he made no attempt to deny the fact of his love. But to Henry Brent's demand that he should then and for ever resign all pretensions to Isabel, he answered that his troth was once plighted, and he could not revoke it; and that he could not make a promise which he had not the power over himself to keep honourably.

Henry Brent had many good qualities, but a patient temper was not included among them. He was deeply incensed at this answer of his kinsman, and at once bade him leave the place, and never again darken the doors of Melcomb.

Had Gilbert been guided by his natural good sense, rather than by his love, he would at this juncture have acknowledged himself beaten, and would have withdrawn from the field. But he was under the influence of a power which forbade him to surrender Isabel, or even to leave the neighbourhood in which he might still hope to see her. He fondly flattered himself that had not his interview with her been so strangely interrupted, he might have brought it to a favourable issue, and that could he again prevail on her to speak with him, he might still hope for success. In any case, speak to her he must; to leave the neighbourhood without doing so would be more than he could bear.

It would be vain to say that the idea of his mistress having another and a more favoured lover had never crossed his mind. Naturally, this was one of the many conjectures by which he had endeavoured to account for the change in her feelings towards himself; but he had heard and seen nothing calculated to bear out such a surmise, and had therefore dismissed it from his thoughts as unworthy of himself and of her. Certainly, he never imagined that her visit to the Old Lodge was to meet a rival; nor had the face at the window raised any such suspicion; indeed, he was more than half inclined to attribute that appearance to some supernatural cause, for the patronage of St. Eustace had not been sufficient to save the hollow from the reputation of being haunted, even in those days.

Instead, therefore, of returning to London, Gilbert took up his

abode in a hostelry not far from Melcomb, and watched and waited till chance should afford him that opportunity of speaking with his cousin for which he so much longed. He did not doubt but that the Old Stone Hunting Lodge would still at times be frequented by her, as it had always been; and it was there that he resolved chiefly to seek her.

At no great distance from the nominal domains of St. Eustace, a large oak—of note as an ancient landmark—stood half within and half without the pale of Melcomb Park; and to Gilbert, by whom every nook and corner around Melcomb were known, it suggested itself as affording a place at which the park might be entered with ease and secrecy. Unknown to him, Piers Oversley had also, by Gurton's advice, made use of it for the same purpose, as well as employing it for another, which it may be well to mention at this place.

Any billet which that gallant desired to send to Mistress Isabel he deposited in the hollow of this tree, which he did without entering the park, or arousing suspicion. It was then within reach of Gurton, who could from his own side of the barrier take it from its hiding-place, and convey it to his wife, from whom it reached the hands of her lady; whilst the reverse of this arrangement conveyed Isabel's own missives to her lover. It was to Barbara's invention that this contrivance was due.

But as Gilbert made the old tree a means of climbing into the forbidden Eden, he knew nothing of those weapons for his own wounding which its trunk might contain. Twice he thus scaled the park palings, and without result; the third time he was more successful. As he stole unseen along the brow of the hill, he first observed the ranger, his cross-bow on his arm, sauntering leisurely in the direction of his cottage, and a moment afterwards he became aware that Isabel was herself climbing the steep path from the dell.

The better to escape observation, Gilbert had disguised himself in a green hunting suit instead of his ordinary attire, so that through the branches Isabel did not see, or, in any case, recognise him, till she was close upon him; but the expression which her beautiful face then assumed was not one to encourage

a despairing lover. Gilbert could see in it nothing but hatred and aversion. If she could have passed him without pausing or unclosing her lips she would have done so; but this he did not permit. He stood right in front of her in the middle of the path. "Isabel!" he said only, and held out his hand beseechingly towards her.

But she took no notice of the proffered token of amity. "How dare you," she said, "thus like a robber to waylay and stop me? Stand aside, and hinder me not, Gilbert Brent!"

"Cousin Isabel!" he cried, passionately; "hear me, hear me! I must speak with you; for this once give me a hearing!"

"I have heard you too much already," she answered, haughtily. "Stand out of my way, or I call to yonder yeoman. He carries his cross-bow, and knows his duty towards such as break into his master's park."

"Oh, Isabel!" he cried again, as he mechanically obeyed her gesture, and fell back; "can nothing move you? Have you no memory of old times?" But she passed on, and left him standing alone and motionless.

She proceeded for a few steps. She heard his appeal, but did not heed it; instead of it her own last words were ringing in her ears—"*He carries his cross-bow, and knows his duty towards such as break into his master's park.*" Her own hasty threat had suggested a resolution to her. She stopped, turned round, and beckoned him to approach.

"Will nothing satisfy you," she said, "that you thus persecute me—nothing but giving you another interview?"

"I must speak with you again, Cousin Isabel."

"Then I will give you one. To-morrow, half-an-hour after sunset, come to the Old Stone Hunting Lodge. I will be there alone."

"I shall not fail," he said; "no, not if it should cost me my life."

"But listen," she continued; "my father, in his anger against you, has given orders that no intruder shall be allowed to enter the park; yet Ralph Gurton will do as I bid him. Come to-morrow in the same hunter's dress that you wear to-day, and

the ranger will be blind to your being Gilbert Brent, and know you only as the Green Huntsman who will come to meet me. If he hail you, answer only, "I go thither," and point towards the old lodge, and for that he shall let you pass; remember this."

So saying, she again turned, and walked hastily down the hill.

As she passed by Ralph Gurton, she half paused that she might acquaint him with the design she was plotting, and secure his co-operation; but, on second thoughts, she hurried onwards. "Better I should not open the subject to him," she said to herself. "I will place him in the hands of one whose influence over him is more complete than mine."

That evening Barbara was summoned to a consultation with her young mistress. It will not be necessary to set down all that passed between them. Barbara's parting words will sufficiently indicate their drift. They were—"Fear nothing, sweet one; I shall so order Ralph that he shall do his part; and he never needs to shoot two bolts at the same deer."

VIII.—A SHOT WITH THE CROSS-BOW.

ANYONE less infatuated than Gilbert Brent would have seen enough in Isabel's manner to have felt his hopes utterly crushed; but an interview with her was just then the one object he desired. She had made him an assignation, and however ungraciously she had done it, he rejoiced in it. He had said truly that he would rather have died than failed; and with a heart lighter than it had been for many a day past, he set forth to keep the appointment.

He had almost reached the old oak tree, which has before been mentioned, when he was startled by seeing some person standing close to its bole, and apparently quite unaware of his approach. The person in question was none other than Piers Oversley, who was at the moment groping in the hollow trunk for an expected letter of Isabel's. As he drew it out he turned, and, as he did so, suddenly found himself face to face with

his rival. Once only had Oversley seen that rival before, and his solitary glance at him had been through the shattered quarries of the window of the Old Hunting Lodge; but we may be well sure that on the occasion in question he had taken good note of his features, and was in no danger of forgetting them readily.

Oversley was startled, but not to the same extent as Gilbert, who, when the stranger turned round, at once recognised the face he had seen in the window. There was no question now as to its being other than real flesh and blood; and in a moment the true nature of this man's motive for haunting the neighbourhood of the lodge flashed upon his mind. The billet he held in his hand was convincing proof. It *was* a rival then that had caused all this misery, and that rival stood before him. Gilbert felt that he could have made at his throat, and worried him like a wild beast.

It may have been that in his heart Piers Oversley was not a whit more peaceably disposed than Gilbert, but he was an older man, and had been bred at court. The young scholar's hand had involuntarily strayed to the pummel of his sword. Piers did nothing of the kind; he merely raised his own, and, doffing his cap, made a low, and, as his rival thought, a somewhat sarcastic bow, saying, as he did so, "Here, then, it is my good hap to meet that clerkly Master Gilbert Brent of whom I have heard so much."

Gilbert was in no mood for empty courtesies, and the salute with which he returned that of Oversley was so stiff as to be scarce perceptible. "How, or whence," he said, "my name may have reached you I am ignorant, yet such it is; of yours I know nothing, and nothing do I care to know."

"Nevertheless, Sir Scholar, I shall gladly make myself known to you. Piers Oversley is my name, a poor esquire, and much at your clerkship's service. Nay, disdain not my fellowship; we have, as it would seem, a common interest, and therefore should be friends."

"I know nothing of the common interest you speak of, and desire none of your friendship," said Gilbert, bluntly.

"Ah!" replied the courtier; "can you be ignorant that I speak of the favour of fair Mistress Isabel Brent, to which we both would seem to be aspirants?"

The smile and the sarcastic politeness of the tone in which Oversley delivered this was ten times more irritating to his rival than any professed rudeness could have been; and his temper, already under no very strong control, now fairly burst forth. "Hark you, Master Piers Oversley," he cried; "since by your own showing you are my supplanter and my enemy, as such alone will I meet you. Draw, if you are a man, and defend yourself!" and Gilbert's weapon flew from its scabbard.

"Nay, gentle youth," answered Oversley, in the same unruffled tone; "be not too fast. I see no ground for a quarrel. If you have lost, and I have won favour with this lady, I have more reason to pity than harm you; also, it would be little to my mind to do violence to any kinsman of Mistress Isabel Brent. Put up your iron; there is no cause for a quarrel betwixt us two."

"No cause for a quarrel!" cried Gilbert, fiercely; "then let this be one!" and, so saying, he flung his glove with all his force in the other's face.

The blood rushed to Oversley's cheeks and forehead, and he crushed the offending glove beneath his heel with a gesture of contempt; yet he still retained his composure, and said, in even a more quiet tone than before, "You are in the right, young man; there is good ground for a quarrel now. Therefore look to your life, as he may well need to do who crosses swords with Piers Oversley."

Gilbert needed no second bidding, and he flew upon his rival as fiercely as a wild cat. He was young, strong, and active; but Oversley had made no idle boast of his swordsmanship, and the young scholar's fury expended itself in vain. At first Oversley simply stood on the defensive, and then, when his opponent had exhausted himself, by a well-directed lunge he stretched him bleeding at his feet.

To a man like Piers Oversley, who had taken part in at least a dozen such scenes as this, the result brought no particular feelings of horror or remorse. He had wished to chastise

Gilbert Brent, and he had done so, though perhaps rather more severely than he had intended. He scarcely would have wished his deed undone, even had such a thing been possible. And yet he was not a man devoid of kindly human feelings; for now when his antagonist was disabled he would gladly have given him any help in his power. He raised the young man's head upon his knee, and tried to stanch the blood which was flowing freely.

Gilbert could see that all this was meant in kindness; but he shook his head. "It is in vain," he said; "I am going fast. Only give me your hand, and hear what I have to say. I hold you guiltless of my death, which has been altogether of my own seeking; and now, if you would have a dying man's blessing, promise to do one thing for me."

"Anything that I can in reason do," said Oversley, "shall be done; on the word of a gentleman."

"Know, then," continued Gilbert, in a low tone, "that I was even now on my way to the Old Stone Lodge, there to meet with Isabel Brent. I had solemnly pledged myself to be there, and not to fail. Go now, and tell her that to the death I was constant to my love, and that my last words and thoughts were of her. Say, also, that now I give her back her troth."

At these words Oversley gave a start, which drew a groan from the wounded man.

"Stay," he went on, in a yet more feeble voice, "there is danger on the way. A watch has been set by my kinsman, and whosoever breaks his park will be slain. Put on these my green doublet and cap. The Green Huntsman will be known and spared. If any man bids you stay, point to the lodge, and say, 'I go thither,' and you will be let pass."

"All this I shall bear in mind," replied the other, as he assumed the disguise.

"It is well," said Gilbert; "haste thee away then, and do my bidding;" and then, falling back, he became unconscious.

A pang of jealousy, and a feeling of distrust in Isabel's good faith, had stung Oversley as Gilbert had told of her assignation with himself; and he would have burned to meet her that he

might test her feelings towards his fallen rival, if for no other reason; but there were other motives which made him gladly hasten to perform his promise. "Something of my old good luck is still left to me," he said to himself, as he strode across the park. "The youngling has fallen in fair fight; yet none saw it, and some men there are who may call the deed murder; therefore I must from Hilworth till the matter be forgotten or made smooth; so, save for this happy chance—this ill-starred stripling's story and his disguise—I must have gone, and seen no more of Isabel. Now I hasten to her at once, and plan how she may join me; nay, if all go well, she shall fly with me this very night."

Busied with such thoughts as these, he reached the outskirts of the wood. The grey light of evening still glimmered about the open spaces of the park; but under the trees the dark shadows were gathering apace. "I must hasten on," he thought, "or Isabel will weary of waiting in yonder dreary hollow;" and he hurried on into the thickening gloom of the woodland path.

Near that spot—twice before mentioned—where the winding way descended to the Old Stone Hunting Lodge, half hidden by underwood, and with his back against a tree, stood Ralph Gurton. For an hour past he had been standing there with his cross-bow ready bent in his hand. The stout ranger had undertaken an office which he abhorred from the bottom of his soul; but he had been led to believe it was his duty, and he had undertaken it, and would not shrink. He stood there sullenly determined to perform it to the uttermost. Yet as the twilight deepened, and the night drew rapidly on, his heart beat more freely. "The saints be praised!" he muttered at last. "The time is well-nigh past, and he comes not. He will not come now."

An instant later he saw that he had congratulated himself too quickly, for a figure came hastily down the path, and in the uncertain light the ranger thought that he could make out a green cap and hunting-dress. "It is the Green Huntsman," he thought, and levelled his bow. A moment afterwards he let it fall again, and his breath came more freely, for surely the step and bearing were Piers Oversley's, and not those of the man he had

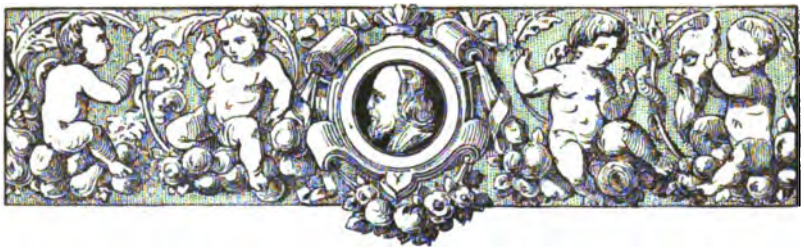
been taught to expect. "I will hail him," he said to himself; "for therein lies my surest test;" and then aloud—"Ho! whoever passes there; stand, in King Henry's name, or I shoot!"

But the Green Huntsman paid no obedience to his summons, and hurried on, only answering as he went, and pointing down the way, "I go thither."

"Then," said the ranger, slowly, "your blood be upon your own head!" and with that he discharged his piece.

Barbara said truly that her husband never shot twice at the same deer. In another second Piers Oversley lay dead across the path, with a cross-bow quarrel through his brain.

Little more of this history remains to be told, except that Gilbert Brent did not die of the severe wound given him by his rival, but survived it many years. Shortly after his recovery he entered the Church; and by his learning and excellent parts, so advanced himself therein that he has always been looked upon by us as one of the ornaments of our family. His cousin Isabel he never saw again. That unhappy lady was sent to a convent, and there, not many years afterwards, she died, less, it was said, of any bodily ailment than of sorrow and remorse.



INTERLOGUE II.

FROM the time of the above tragical event, a considerable space intervenes before any incidents of a private nature, of sufficient interest to find a place in this chronicle, are noted in our family annals. Nor do I gather that any of the name of Brent gained special distinction in public affairs throughout the earlier and greater part of the Wars of the Roses. In those times, our ancestors would seem to have simply followed the leadership of their powerful neighbour the Earl of Warwick, and to have changed sides whenever he thought proper to do so; in which line of conduct they were no doubt guided by a politic regard for the safety of their own house and lands, and not by any strong leaning towards either of the rival factions. Yet at the last of this series of struggles—the Battle of Stoke, namely—it is recorded that one Richard Brent of Melcomb, an esquire of lands, was, for his bravery shown against the German mercenaries, made knight on the field.

Whether the zeal then evinced for the House of Tudor procured Court favour, or whether it was obtained through the mediation of some noble patron, I know not; but at the Dissolution in the next reign, on the suppression of Halliford Priory, a free grant of the lands of Worsley was made to Hugh, son of the above-named Sir Richard Brent. By which grant, and certain other accessions of property through marriage, the name

of Brent was enabled to bear itself bravely in the brave times which followed; and during the reign of Elizabeth of glorious memory, the Manor House being found too small and antiquated for the importance of the family and the increased luxury of the times, great part of it was demolished and rebuilt.

But after this long season of prosperity, there followed, in the next age, a time of adversity. In the differences between King Charles and his Parliament, the then representatives of the family had the ill-fortune to engage with much zeal on his Majesty's party; Richard Brent, at that time lord of Melcomb, aiding the King with money, and by his personal courage shown in various actions. His two younger brothers were also men of some note on the same side. Nathaniel, who was a divine, by his eloquence, both in preaching and writing, ably advocated the Royal cause; whilst the youngest brother, Major Gilbert Brent, was accounted throughout the latter part of the war to be as stout and diligent an officer as any in his Majesty's service, and was well respected even of the opposite party.

He passed unharmed through the war; but after the execution of his Majesty, being in South Wales at the time Colonel Laugharne and his friends declared for the King, he became one of the leaders in that enterprise; and being afterwards, with certain other officers and gentlemen, taken at the capture of Pembroke, he, with the other chief men engaged in that unhappy business, received sentence of death. Nevertheless, the Parliament having resolved that one only should suffer, a paper for each man was placed in a steel cap; one paper being blank, and on each of the others these words written—"Life given by God." Major Brent being third in the order of drawing, by ill-hap took the blank paper, and was forthwith led out and shot, receiving his death like a stout soldier and valiant gentleman.

To the head of the family the close of these troubles was also highly disastrous; for at that time Mr. Richard Brent was threatened with confiscation, and to avoid utter ruin, he made friends with some of the prevailing party; he was thus enabled, by the sale of part of his estates and by fines raised on others, to save his house and some wreck of his fortune.

From that time the Brents of Melcomb have been in no position to assume much importance in the country, and Melcomb itself has borne witness to the departed glory of its possessors. The park has long since been done away, and converted into arable and pasture land; and as the diminished household has needed less space, some parts of the house have been allowed to become ruinous.

Such is a brief sketch of our family history till the period of my next narrative, the incidents of which may be supposed to occur about the accession of the House of Hanover.

JEST AND EARNEST.

I.—TWO HOUSES.

SOME fifty, or nearly fifty, years ago, there were plenty of young people, and merry times enough, in our Melcomb neighbourhood. In this old Manor House, now so silent, there were four young men and maidens, all full of life and merriment; and again, in its close vicinity, at Worsley Grange, you might have seen a still larger number, all in the happy spring-tide of life, and with the fullest capacity for enjoyment. The members of the two families were in those days on the most intimate terms, and spent much time together; whilst schemes of pleasure, such as were best suited to the season, were matters of almost daily arrangement between them.

As the crow flies, Worsley Grange is little more than a mile from Melcomb. By following a footpath through Melcomb Wood, and then crossing a little plain of high open land, you come upon other belts of woodland which fringe the farther brow of the hill, and give beauty to the slopes immediately overhanging Worsley; and straight down these green fields the footway leads on to the Grange. It is little used now, but it was a well-worn path in those days. As you crossed the high ground by this track, you might have seen, a little to the left, an insulated eminence, crowned by a tall clump of trees, and showing traces

of ancient embankments. This was Norbury Mounds; and I make mention of it in this place, because it is likely that I shall have to refer to it more than once in the course of the coming narrative.

Worsley Grange lay at the bottom of the hill, in a pretty sheltered valley; but as a building it had little claim to beauty or antiquity. I say "had," for years ago it was pulled down, and not a trace of it now remains. The house was modern, and so were its occupants, the Heatherbys. They had nothing of the ancient standing of Melcomb and our own family. The estate of Worsley, as I have elsewhere mentioned, was formerly Abbey property, and my own ancestors had obtained a grant of it at the time of the Dissolution. But the troubles incident to the Great Rebellion caused its loss; the Brent of that time being glad to sell it at a third of its value to an influential member of the winning party, that he might thus secure his remaining property, with the confiscation of which he was threatened.

The purchaser was one Obadiah Heatherby, a person of unknown origin, who, like many others, rose to wealth and importance in those troubled times on the ruin of better men than himself. By this worthy, a house far more than proportioned to the size of his estate had been built, and every possible effort made to establish himself on an equal footing with the older gentlemen, his neighbours.

But so far as he was personally concerned, these attempts on the part of Mr. Obadiah Heatherby turned out to be complete failures. The surrounding squires—Royalists to a man—acted as though ignorant of his very existence; and his life was said to have been shortened by the chagrin which their contempt occasioned him.

Even to the next, if not to the third generation, the sins of the Puritan father were visited upon the children, but as time passed on, the old antipathy wore out, and by the period of which I am speaking it had been clean forgotten. The heads of the two families of Brent and Heatherby were at that time upon the most neighbourly of terms; whilst, as I have already said, the young people of the two houses could scarcely, under any circumstances, have been more intimate.

The Mr. Henry Brent who was in those days owner of Melcomb had, for several years, been a widower; and although death had deprived him of more than one of his children, he had still two sons and two daughters surviving. Some may, perhaps, object that I am not a fitting person to give any sketch of the character of Richard, the eldest of the Brent family; but to these I answer that I have undertaken to tell this story, to the right understanding of which some description of that young man will be necessary, and that I shall do my best to speak of him as impartially as any indifferent person might do.

Richard Brent then, had, by the time at which I shall have to introduce him to the reader, reached his six-and-twentieth year; and being heir to an estate—reduced indeed, but still sufficient—had not been bred to any profession. Most part of his time was spent at Melcomb, where he made his home. He was of a grave and thoughtful turn of mind, and occupied himself more among books, and less with the sports of the field, than was common among young men of his condition; still he was a man of too well balanced a mind to allow his love of study to convert him into a bookworm or misanthropic recluse.

Of a totally opposite character was the younger brother Charles, who, as a boy, had been looked upon as destined to do great things in the world; but his parts being rather brilliant than solid, he had as yet done nothing as a man to make good his early promise. Gay, witty, and volatile, with a restless disposition and no power of steady application, he had hitherto failed in making any true start in life. He had at first been entered at Oxford, with a view to the Church; but fearing that a clerical life would be but little to his taste, he had left the university for the pursuit of commerce. But in London he found that the city counting-house had few attractions, and that the pleasures of the town had many; the result was that in less than two years he returned home, having acquired a plentiful supply of debts, and little or no knowledge of business, or of any useful kind, beyond the fact that he should never make a merchant. His present idea of future employment was the army, and meanwhile he was well contented to lead a life of ease and pleasure at Melcomb.

Yet, great as had been the disappointment he had caused, Charles Brent could not be said to have lost his father's affection. His good humour and the easy gaiety of his disposition made him to be beloved as well at home as among all circles in which he mixed; and even the victims of the jokes in which he too constantly indulged found it a hard matter not to forgive him. Of the merry party of young people of which he now formed the life and soul, there was scarcely one who, sooner or later, did not suffer from some of his wild pranks; yet all loved him, and were deeply grieved when in after times his unstable character involved him in a downward career, from which it were better that the veil should not be withdrawn.

At the time of which I speak Charles was little more than twenty years of age, and still younger were the two sisters, Alice and Clarissa. Of these two young ladies I shall need to say but little. They do not take a prominent place in the present story, and there are circumstances in the life of the one last named to which I shall find it necessary hereafter to devote a separate chronicle.

In the family at Worsley Grange there were also two sons, both of ages intermediate between those of the two Brents, and after them had followed four daughters in rapid succession. None of these young ladies were as yet married, although in the graces of person and mind all of them might be said to possess something more than an average share. Such, then, were the two families of Heatherby and Brent.

II.—MOMUS.

FROM what has been premised of the intimacy which existed between a number of young people of such ages as theirs, the reader cannot be surprised if something more than friendships should have developed themselves. Indeed, under the circumstances, it would rather have been surprising if nothing of the nature of a love affair had come about; yet a casual observer

would have said that it was between those two young people of whom it would least have been expected that such a thing actually occurred. It was, namely, between the grave, studious Richard Brent, and Julia, the third of the Heatherby sisters.

There was, I say, some sort of inconsistency in this attachment, for Richard Brent was fully nine years the lady's senior, and it was, moreover, little to be supposed that one of his gravity of disposition would be captivated by the pretty, piquant little maiden of seventeen; yet such was the fact. True, there was as yet no declared attachment, and the two had perhaps scarcely acknowledged its existence even to themselves; but there was an obvious liking, a fondness on the part of each for the society of the other, which, if not love, was so nearly akin to it, as only to need time and circumstance to develop it into that passion, as the slumbering fire may need air to fan it into flame.

Certain it is that the friendship which existed between them—for by that name it must as yet be called—was sufficient to cause some sly jesting on the part of the brothers and sisters of both, although it was not as yet emphatic enough to have originated any rumour, as such connections are generally only too swift to do, among neighbours and acquaintances. Certain also it is, that it was rather owing to Julia's influence than to any inherent love of gaiety, that about this time Richard Brent was less constant at his studies than formerly, and was more frequently to be found taking part in the diversions of the other young people; it is also noticeable that at this period he found it desirable to be often taking walks or rides to Worsley, for which no less frivolous pretexts could be found than that it was necessary for him to carry some book or present to Julia Heatherby.

One of his presents must have especial notice. It was a small rough dog, whose odd looks and evident intelligence induced him to purchase it as an offering to his little mistress. Julia was from home on a visit at the time, and before her return Richard Brent had kept the animal long enough for it to have become thoroughly attached to himself, not to mention that space was also given for the completion of its education in the dozen absurd tricks which he taught it.

In due time Julia had returned to Worsley, and the presentation had been made; but after the little beast had fairly acknowledged her as its lawful sovereign and mistress, it still reserved a right of some sort of fealty to Richard, and, in default of his appearance during two or three successive days at the Grange, made a practice of taking a walk, purely on its own account, across the hill. Arrived at Melcomb, Momus sought out his friend, and after wagging its tail for what it adjudged to be the correct length of time, returned in an orderly manner to Worsley.

If, instead of telling a tale of mere human joys and sorrows, I were bent on writing—what were perhaps a not less worthy task—a volume of anecdotes of dogs, I might be tempted to relate how, when Momus failed in finding the object of his attentions at the Manor House, he was accustomed, one by one, to visit all Richard's usual haunts in its vicinity, and other matters which would go far to prove that the creature possessed far higher mental powers than the blind impulses which we call instinct; but such digressions would be foreign to my story, to which I must now return.

The regularity with which Momus paid his visits had once induced Richard to make him the bearer of a sportive billet to Julia, which she had answered by the same messenger in the same mood; and as these missives had been safely carried to their respective destinations, various letters had afterwards been exchanged in the same manner. The reader must not misunderstand the nature of this correspondence. These letters were of the most trivial and innocent nature possible, and are not in any way to be set down as clandestine love-letters; for, as I have said, no word of love had as yet been spoken between the two.

Such was the state of affairs when, one bright summer morning, little Julia was in the garden of Worsley Grange amusing herself with the gambols of her little favourite. Presently it occurred to her that she had last night finished the eighth volume of the romance which Mr. Richard Brent was then lending to her, and that she was dying to make the acquaintance of the ninth and last, and to know whether the hero and heroine were actually married and lived happy ever afterwards.

She at once ran into the house and wrote a hasty note to her friend and book-purveyor, begging him to send the wished-for literature; then, returning to the garden, she with some difficulty induced Momus to let go the ball which, as a make-believe rat, he was zealously worrying, and fastened the letter round his neck; after which she opened the garden gate, and bade him trot away as fast as he could to Melcomb.

At a pace which showed that he had an exalted idea of the importance of his mission, Momus took his way up Worsley Banks and down through Melcomb Wood, never once allowing himself to be allured into chasing the rabbits which scampered across his path, or in any other way proving negligent of his trust. If Miss Julia Heatherby's letter was not duly delivered, and if she had not the satisfaction of receiving on that very day a full confirmation of her conjectures as to the future bliss of the imaginary lovers in whom she was interested, I wish to have it distinctly understood that it was not Momus who was in fault.

The accident which intervened was one quite unforeseen, and scarcely to have been avoided by the messenger. This unlucky accident was none other than the graceless Charles, who happened at the time to be strolling in the fields between the Manor House and the wood, which were still called, by courtesy, "The Park," though they had long since ceased to be so in fact. Charles was not a man gifted with any especial fondness for dogs—of which deficiency Momus was well aware—and would have passed him with the slightest "good morning," in the shape of a wag, of which his bushy tail was susceptible; nor would Charles have taken much notice of the comical little animal, had not the letter round his neck attracted attention. But this blue-tied packet was a phenomenon into which he thought it desirable to inquire; and having coaxed Momus to him, he proceeded to examine it.

The vulture has not a keener scent for carrion than had Charles Brent for anything that might be made food for laughter. Here was a letter from Julia Heatherby to his brother, and an opportunity for mischief and mystification which must by no means be neglected.

PLAY-FELLOWS.

NAY, do not whine, play-fellow mine, nor bound and gambol free,
But lightly go to a friend we know, and bear him this from me,
Play-fellows true are I and you, together we sport to-day,
But my sport may yet be earnest, pet, while yours will be always play!

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Taking Momus beneath his arm, he carried him to his own room, and there set himself to fabricate a letter in the place of Julia's poor little billet. To him this was not a difficult task; for among Charles Brent's worthless accomplishments, a remarkable, though I cannot say a fortunate, facility in imitating handwriting was prominent. The letter which he penned was addressed in a formal and ceremonious manner, and set forth that Miss Julia Heatherby had attempted to read the volume sent to her by Mr. Richard Brent, but had been astonished to find the matter it contained to be such as no gentlewoman could think of perusing. As she well knew the methodical habits of the sender, she could not suppose that this matter could be referred to the score of carelessness or accident, and therefore must decline any future loans of books at his hands. If he had any satisfactory explanation to offer, she begged him to do so; but otherwise, she desired him to understand that their friendship must now be considered as at an end.

This precious composition was tied up in the same manner as the genuine epistle; and as Charles fastened it to the neck of Momus, he was not a little tickled at the idea of the bewilderment his brother would feel when he opened and read it.

Richard Brent was not of a suspicious temperament. He perused and re-perused the letter, and was perplexed to a greater degree than had ever entered into his brother's hopes; but notwithstanding the preposterous nature of its contents, the idea that it was a hoax never entered his mind. On the contrary, he busied himself to explain the assumed incongruity. Such a thing was possible as that, by mistake, a book might have been sent which, to Miss Heatherby's nice judgment, might seem objectionable, although it was hard to see how such an error could have happened; and this he admitted in the answer which he wrote, at the same time announcing his intention of visiting the Grange that very evening, at the hour of seven, and then fully unriddling the whole enigma.

Alas! this answer was never destined to reach Julia Heatherby. It was committed to Momus; but five minutes after it had been indited, it was intercepted and read with infinite

relish by that scapegrace Charles, who gloried beyond measure to find how completely his brother had been taken in.

Again his skill in caligraphy was put to the test; and this time, owing to his greater familiarity with the writing to be imitated, he produced a still greater triumph of deception than the former. This letter ran as follows:—

"DEAR MISS JULIA,—Your commands with respect to the volume required find me much engaged upon important business, or I should at once have ridden to Worsley to place it in your hands; and, more especially, as there are matters of far deeper interest than books—at least to me—of which I am desirous to speak with you. As these matters are of a nature to demand a private and uninterrupted interview, will you allow me to ask you, so far, to grant me a special favour, as to meet me at seven o'clock this evening beneath the trees on Norbury Mounds? I desire no answer to these hasty lines; but, under any circumstances, shall await your coming with impatience at the place and time mentioned.—Your humble servant and admirer, R. B."

"There," said Charles complacently to himself, as he added the initials, "if I am any judge of the extent of the silly girl's folly, this will bring her; and then, unless I am mistaken, there will be a little more sport for me." So saying, he affixed his forgery to the neck of the unconscious Momus, and at last allowed him to return in peace to Worsley Grange.

III.—ANTIQUARIAN MATTERS.

THE next proceeding of Mr. Charles Brent was, if in some respects less objectionable than the last, still less dignified. He dived into the remote back regions of the house, and there, through the good offices of a kitchen-maid, with whom he was on terms approaching to familiarity, obtained an earthen pipkin, of the brown material which is, I believe, commonly known among housewives as Nottingham-ware.

His first act, with regard to his newly-acquired property, was

to take a convenient stone, and ruthlessly break it in pieces; he then produced several halfpennies, and these, with the same instrument, he so hammered and battered as wholly to obliterate every trace of the legends and devices which they had borne. This done, he placed them in vinegar, and shortly had the satisfaction of seeing them assume that delicate green tinge so highly prized by the collector of antiquities. The motive for these acts may, perhaps, seem somewhat obscure to the reader, but suffice it to say that they were undertaken in the interests of science.

Putting the battered halfpennies and fragments of pipkin in his pockets, he now took his way to Norbury Mounds, a spot to which some allusion has already been made. On the summit of a considerable natural elevation, a lofty artificial bank of earth, surrounded by a deep ditch and rampart of the same material, had at some remote age been thrown up; and the whole was now overshadowed by a noble growth of forest trees. These remains of antiquity, though within a short distance of Melcomb Wood, were situated upon the Worsley estate, and were, indeed, much nearer to the Grange than to the Manor House.

In one of the embankments a portion of earth had been displaced on the previous day by Charles and his friends, the young Heatherbys, in digging out a badger; and in this loose soil he deposited, and carefully covered over, the bulk of his ceramic and numismatic treasures, reserving one specimen only of each. These last he plentifully plastered with the yellow earth of the mound, and having wrapped them in paper, strolled down towards Melcomb Rectory.

The rector of Melcomb at that time was the Rev. Mr. Septimus Howker, a bachelor of rather more than middle age, and a man who affected, if he did not possess, no small amount of learning in antiquarian matters. He was, I say, a bachelor; but it was rather his misfortune than his fault that he was still unmarried. He was not averse to the society of ladies; far from it; but there was in his tall, stooping, and ungainly figure, and slovenly exterior, coupled with a happy knack of absence of mind, and a faculty for never saying the right thing at the proper time,

a something so uncouth and provocative of laughter, as constantly to have caused the miscarriage of his matrimonial attempts. He had many amiable qualities, as everyone admitted, and no doubt many ladies might have been found in the neighbourhood who would gladly have shared with him the proceeds of the rich livings of Melcomb and Worsley; but, like an ill-trained hawk, he had ever been prone to fly at such game as was beyond his reach, and had thus secured to himself a series of disappointments, much to the amusement of his neighbours and his own discomfiture. But he had comfort under his sorrows, and after each successive fall he returned with fresh ardour to his antiquarian researches.

The little-appreciated attentions of this divine had recently been directed towards our bright, fair-haired little friend, Julia Heatherby; by whom, it will not be too much to say, he was utterly detested—a fact of which, as the reader may infer from the little that has been said of his character, he was probably the last person to note the existence. Charles Brent, however, who was quick enough in observing anything which could be made conducive to raising a laugh, saw exactly to what extent his friend Julia and the parson affected each other, and looked upon them as proper subjects for his mischief-making operations.

The abode of this learned gentleman partook largely of the oddity of its owner. It was an unarranged museum—a perfect lumber-room of objects of antiquity, or things which had been foisted upon him as such. For in making his collections, it must be admitted that he had, like many other collectors, often allowed his enthusiasm to outrun his judgment, and the bumpkins of his own and the neighbouring parishes had sold him much old metal and leather which had far less respectable claims to antiquity than their own Sunday suits; moreover, if the truth must be spoken, our friend Charles had on various occasions swelled the collection with riches of a highly apocryphal character.

The *savant* was in his study, engaged on a paper to be read before a society of his brother antiquarians—"On the best method of restoring Stonehenge, and the propriety of protecting that invaluable monument from the destructive effects of the weather

by a slated roof"—a performance which was afterwards admitted to show much ingenuity and imaginative power.

Charles Brent apologised for interrupting his literary labours; he should not, he said, have ventured to distract his attention from a work of so much moment to the scientific world, had it not been that he had something of importance to communicate; but discoveries had been made at Norbury Mounds which, he was sure, would be of interest to him.

Had the *attollens aurem* of the Rev. Mr. Howker been more largely developed, he would have pricked up his ears; as it was, he did so by a figure of speech merely. "My dear young friend," he said, rising from his seat, "I feel an especial interest, I may say a most peculiar interest, in all that concerns Norbury Mounds. My own theory of the origin of the earthworks and the derivation of the name is the one which must, eventually, override all others. As to my friend Billon's improbable conjectures——"

"As you are well aware," broke in Charles, who saw with dismay that the whole story, which he knew by heart, was coming—"as you are well aware, I have long been a convert to your own more plausible view. But the discovery of which I speak may be one which will either confirm or refute it. On removing a portion of one of the mounds in the pursuit of a badger, we have met with what appear to be the remains of a rudely constructed urn, once probably a receptacle for coins. I have taken care that the deposit should be disturbed as little as possible, as I well know that the precious fragments will be less exposed to injury if removed from their resting-place by the practised hand of an antiquary."

"Most true, most true," said the *savant;* "irreparable damage has many times been done by the ignorant and careless, and nothing can be more desirable than to consider an object *in situ.* But let us see what you have brought."

"A fragment of the urn, and a solitary coin," said Charles, producing his potsherd and battered halfpenny. They were closely scrutinised by the antiquary.

A smile of intense satisfaction beamed over his lean features. "Yes," he said at length, "these priceless relics do indeed

wonderfully bear out my theory. Formerly it was said that these mounds were Roman—every earthwork was called Roman by our ignorant predecessors. That the mounds were not Roman, this pottery and coin bear witness, for they are not Roman. Then the ingenious Mr. Billon came down and broached his theory, that Norbury was a contraction of Normanbury, and showed the mounds to be the remains of a Norman castle. There was not a tittle of real evidence in his favour, high as his name stands; and the tradition that a Normandy pippin was found growing in a hedge near the spot, of which he makes so much, can have no weight except with the vulgar."

"None," said Charles, gravely.

"None whatever; and now this coin will enable me triumphantly to refute him. If I mistake not, this ancient piece is copper. Now in Norman days we had no copper money in England, nor, indeed, till those of the second Charles. Consequently, it cannot be Norman."

"A better negative proof need not be wished," said Charles, with a slow, approving movement of the head.

"No," continued the antiquary, warming with his subject; "nor a better positive one on my own side. I have long been convinced that Norbury Mounds were thrown up as the tomb and monument of some Norse king or chieftain, probably some leader of the Norwegian mercenaries employed by Ethelred against their natural enemies, the Danes. Nor-bury, the Norseman's burying-place—the name alone is enough to carry conviction; yet if more proof is wanted, here we have it (pointing to the peculiar indented ornament, common to the ware of which the fragment was formed). Here is a small, though a very small, portion of an inscription. It is not in Latin, it is not in Norman-French, it is not in Anglo-Saxon; consequently, it must be in Runic, and of Norwegian origin, though I regret that I am not able to read that character with fluency. By much the same line of reasoning we might establish an identical origin for the coin. They are both conclusive evidence of the soundness of my theory. My dear young friend, your visit has indeed given me a triumph and a pleasure."

"Nothing could have delighted me more than to have done so," said Charles—as was indeed the fact—"but further discoveries will repay our search. When shall I have the gratification of examining the mounds with you, and pointing out the exact site of the deposit?"

"At once, at once," replied the antiquary, again rising; "in so important a matter it is desirable that no time should be lost."

"Unfortunately," returned Charles, "I shall have pressing business which will occupy me for several hours; but if you could be at the mounds this evening, say at seven, I would then undertake to show you something worth the seeing."

"If it cannot be earlier, I must be contented with the time you propose," said the enthusiastic Howker, sitting down with a sigh of disappointment; and with that he returned to his archæological treatise; whilst the traitor Charles, with much satisfaction, took his way to the Manor House.

IV.—THE RENDEZVOUS.

JULIA HEATHERBY was not a little astonished when she received the letter which the reader has already had the pleasure of reading, though I will not undertake to say that she was altogether displeased with it. Considering the footing upon which Richard Brent stood with regard to herself, it seemed to her that this note, making, as it did, an assignation, was somewhat presumptuous. Had she been a little more experienced, and a little less kind-hearted, she might perhaps have treated this request as an impertinence, and left it unnoticed. But little Julia was very young, and she would not willingly have hurt the feelings of any one, least of all those of Mr. Richard Brent, for whom she admitted a very decided liking. Moreover—for why should the truth be concealed—she was not, perhaps, without some curiosity to hear what the subject might be on which he desired to speak with her; of its nature she could only form one plausible conjecture, and if she were right, it would not be a theme wholly

displeasing to her. In short, when evening came, Miss Julia Heatherby, with no other attendant than the faithful Momus, might have been seen tripping up Worsley Bank, and entering the shady grove which overshadowed the slopes of Norbury Mounds.

The idea that Richard would not be there and waiting for her was one which had never occurred to her mind; she was not a little surprised, therefore, to find that no human being save herself was near the mounds. In no very good humour, either with him or with herself, she wandered round the spot for some time. At last an approaching figure was indistinctly seen through the trees. It was evidently making for the entrenchments; it drew near, and then, to her utter discomfiture, she discovered that it was not Richard Brent, but the Rev. Septimus Howker.

Julia's heart sank within her. She would gladly have taken to her legs, and ran away like a very Daphne, had not good manners forbidden it. Yet her greeting to him was the coldest she could assume; she had, she said, already extended her walk too far, and must at once hasten homewards.

Simple Julia! If she supposed that her reverend admirer could by anything she might do or say be brought to see that his society was not desired, she was altogether mistaken. Perceptive powers for such purposes were altogether absent from his composition; and he clung faster than a leech. At the sight of this young lady his antiquarian ardour had entirely given place to feelings of gallantry. This was an opportunity for winning Miss Julia's good graces which was not to be neglected. Here they were among those very remains of antiquity upon which he, and he alone, was the great authority; and now was the time to fill her with admiration for his learning and powers of mind.

Deluded being! By standing on his head, or by turning somersaults, he would have had an equally good chance of winning her favour, had he but possessed the grace to know it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he had not; and so dilated on his pet theory of the origin of the mounds, demolishing his opponents, and

enunciating his own views, with an earnestness which would have provoked her laughter, if vexation would but have allowed her to laugh. And yet without absolute rudeness, of which she was incapable, she could not free herself; escape came eventually, but scarcely in a form she could have desired.

With his whimsical brain still bent on plotting mischief, Charles Brent had been leisurely walking down towards the Grange at the moment when Julia was climbing the hill. He had expected to see her moving in that direction; he saw her, and was gratified; and with a heart glowing with satisfaction, pursued his way to Worsley.

Julia's sisters, with a young lady visitor, were walking on the bowling-green; Charles joined them, and was soon busy in a lively conversation, in the course of which he managed to throw out insinuations that Miss Julia was carrying on a more serious flirtation with the Rev. Mr. Howker than was admitted. This was questioned by the elder Miss Heatherbys—who, by-the-bye, had not been remiss in sarcasms on the subject in poor Julia's presence; but who, now she was not present to be made suffer, professed, and probably felt, the most disdainful incredulity. Thereupon Charles defended his position by asserting his conviction that she was at that very moment keeping an assignation with the divine; and, on being challenged to do so, professed himself ready to make good what he said by leading the whole party to the place.

Accordingly, under his escort they set out for the mounds; and on approaching, Charles, in wicked triumph, had the satisfaction of pointing out the two engaged apparently in an interesting *tête-à-tête*, which that arch-deceiver at first declared he would not have interrupted for the world, though on second thoughts he admitted that he might perhaps find some little gratification in the parson's discomfiture.

Charles knew his man perfectly well, and knew that he was not one whom it was difficult to render ridiculous. Purely accidental as had been this meeting with the lady on the part of Mr. Howker, so nervous and devoid of self-possession was that gentleman, that he could not, under any circumstances, have

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been more covered with confusion, or looked more guilty. Poor little Julia, too, blushed like a damask rose. On the whole, the rencounter with the supposed lovers was a scene which the graceless Charles enjoyed from the very bottom of his heart.

Certainly, it demanded some little tact on the part of our plotter to prevent the antiquary from divulging the engagement which had been the real motive for his coming on that evening to Norbury Mounds; but this, by skilful generalship, he succeeded in doing for several minutes. He then contrived that the ladies should find it desirable to turn homewards; and with a promise of overtaking them on the way, he remained behind for the expressed purpose of speaking a few words on a business matter with the Rev. Septimus Howker.

No sooner had his fair friends left the spot, than Charles turned to the rector, and made profuse apologies for the lateness of his arrival. Nothing, he said, could have annoyed him more than to have been detained by a bevy of frivolous girls from the pursuit of science and the conversation of his learned friend. He condoled with Mr. Howker that he, too, should have had the current of his speculations interrupted by having been obliged to make conversation for that giddy and uninformed young woman, Miss Julia Heatherby. All which to Howker —who was groaning under the interruption of his conversation with that young lady, to whom he had intended to have said much more had time permitted—was anything but soothing.

It was in vain that Charles led him to his treasure-trove; Julia's face had thrown all antiquarian interests quite into the background; and his tormentor had the pleasure of seeing that ever and anon he turned from his digging to cast furtive glances towards the direction in which his fair one was fast receding. He had hardly a word to say on the Scandinavian theory, and even the acquisition of a whole pocketful of broken pipkin and bad halfpennies did not seem to console him. Charles Brent, when he wished him good night, felt that he had succeeded in making him as miserable as heart could wish.

V.—A FALSE SCENT.

THAT same evening, in pursuance of the engagement made in his undelivered letter, Richard Brent mounted his horse and rode over to Worsley Grange. The note which he had, as he believed, received from Julia, had caused him some perplexity, yet little real annoyance; for he did not doubt but that some simple blunder had occurred, and that with five minutes for explanation everything could be put right again, and any feeling of pique she might have conceived towards him removed.

But when he reached the Grange, and found that Julia was not there, his annoyance was great. It seemed to him that, after the intimation of his coming which he had given, her absence could scarcely be otherwise than intentional, and an act of hostility towards him identical in spirit with the offensive contents of her letter.

Obviously, she wished to quarrel with him—to debar him from any closer intimacy. Could it be that she had some other and more favoured lover (the reader will observe that, in his jealous thoughts, Richard Brent assumed to himself that he had some claim to be considered in that light)—some lover who thought their friendship too intimate, and who had bidden Julia shake him off?

Appearances favoured this solution; and if it were the true one, who could this lover be? Surely not this pedantic, blundering parson, who had been jestingly assigned to her; he was sure that his pretty, light-hearted, and yet wise and tender little Julia, could never care for such a scarecrow. Yet girls took strange fancies, and it might be so. Thus, upon the whole, Richard Brent rode from the gates of Worsley in anything but a happy or amiable frame of mind.

He was far on his way before Julia and her sisters returned from Norbury Mounds; but had he even awaited their return, I am quite sure that he would have waited in vain. So deeply had Julia's spirit been hurt by the various events of the evening, that on entering the house she at once shut herself in her own room,

and there, I am grieved to say, she fairly cried with vexation and anger.

A charming little maiden was Julia, but she had a certain little temper of her own. For her vexation, Heaven knows that she had cause enough—the faithless Richard's non-appearance—the forced *tête-à-tête* with the odious Howker—the discovery, on which a false construction was so obviously placed—and the jeers of her relatives, of which she should never hear the last—all these were enough to vex the poor child. But she was angry too, which would have been all very well had her anger been rightly directed, but it was not; instead of being levelled at Charles Brent, it was centered upon his unoffending brother Richard. Richard Brent it was, as she thought, who had lured her into this reprehensible and unhappy expedition. He it was who had dishonourably failed in an engagement of his own making. He it was who had placed her in a position which would expose her to the jests of her brothers and sisters—perhaps to those of the neighbourhood. But she would never forgive him, however penitent he might be—never, never, never.

When Richard Brent left Worsley, he was not without some vindictive feeling towards Julia; but by the next morning every trace of that feeling had disappeared from his mind, and he was only desirous of making his peace with her. I think I may say that he was a just man, and that he even possessed some touch of generosity. He considered that there might have been reasons, unknown to him, by which her conduct was capable of justification; or it might have been only a little maidenish freak, for which no true man ought to bear malice; added to which, he now acknowledged to himself that he loved her, and should be miserable without her.

Thus he thought, and determined not only to get the matter of the letter fully explained, but at the same time to make a full declaration of the state of his own heart, and, if possible, to place matters between himself and Julia on a clearer footing for the future; and to that end he took his horse and again cantered along the lanes to Worsley.

After learning thus much of what had passed in his mind, the

reader may perhaps be able to judge what were the state of his feelings when he was told that Miss Julia Heatherby kept her room, and declined to see him. "Was she ill?" he asked. "No." "Did she give any reason for refusing to receive him?" "None." He sat down and wrote a brief note, in which he expressed his concern lest any act of his might have given her offence, and begged that she would allow him to make explanations in person. This note was answered by another, in which she curtly declined the honour of an interview, and nothing more.

In no very enviable mood Richard Brent mounted and slowly walked his horse towards Melcomb; but it was not for long that he was permitted to indulge in his own thoughts. He had scarcely passed the first turn, when he heard the sharp clatter of hoofs behind him, and in another moment a well-known neighbour, Squire Dorrel of Ashdown, came up.

"Ah! been to Worsley, I see," he began; "should have called there myself, but time presses. All our friends at the Grange well? That's right. So one of the young ladies there is to be married shortly, I hear; don't wonder at it—surprised none of them married before—nice girls—pretty girls—quite an ornament to the county, quite."

"Humph!" said Richard; "I had not heard that any Miss Heatherby was engaged as yet."

"Likely not," his companion went on; "news generally reaches me sooner than most people. Like to hear it—feel an interest in my neighbours' welfare—glad to see my friends marry their daughters satisfactorily. Heatherby has a large family—can't expect all his girls to catch landed gentlemen; and little Julia might do worse than have the parson."

Richard winced, but he took care not to expose himself in Dorrel's eyes. "It is then Miss Julia," he said, "who is to be made a bride, and the bridegroom is——"

"Is Howker, Howker, of course; you might have guessed that much. Has his oddities—not remarkable for good looks—will be double her age for years to come. But all women are fond of the cloth; and Howker is a worthy man—a learned man too,

they say—and has a good living. As I said before, little Julia might do worse."

All this did not drop precisely like oil and wine into his wounds; but Richard Brent was not the man to make a display of any emotion it might cost him. He simply expressed his surprise that one so intimate as himself with the Heatherby family should not have heard the news, if it were reliable, more early; and then inquired whether the authority from which Mr. Dorrel had drawn his information were one to be depended upon.

"Pooh! pooh!" said his companion; "you bookish men can never see what goes on under your own noses. Why, this has been talked of for weeks past. Howker's always at the Grange; and, besides, the—ahem!—young people so arrange their walks as to be constantly meeting on the hill yonder. One of my girls was at the Grange yesterday, and she, with some of the others, happened unexpectedly to come upon the two in their billing and cooing. It was capital fun, she said; for they were in the prettiest confusion imaginable. She—Kate—is certain that the match will come off. But here we are at the finger-post, and you are turning for Melcomb, eh? No; no time to look in this morning. You have not been at Ashdown this month past, and my wife and the girls will be glad to see you."

"I fear," said Richard, "that I shall not be able to pay my respects to Mrs. Dorrel for some time to come. To-morrow I shall be leaving Melcomb for London."

"Well, then, let it be as soon as you return. Good-bye." And Mr. Dorrel trotted briskly down the road.

The necessity for this sudden visit to London was a new discovery on the part of Richard Brent, and I incline to think that Mr. Dorrel's intelligence must have had something to do with originating it. In any case, it was promptly acted upon; and before twenty-four hours were past, he was upon his way to the great metropolis.

VI.—FORSAKEN.

THE eternal and unrelenting hatred vowed by poor little Julia must have rankled in her bosom for nearly a whole day, but towards evening she began to suspect that she would have acted more justly had she allowed him to speak for himself. On the following day she felt assured that he would have been able to palliate his offences if she had only permitted him. On the third she felt quite certain that it was not in Richard's nature to have done wrong intentionally, and that there must have been a mistake somewhere. In short, by this time she would have given anything for a reconciliation.

On that afternoon it had long been arranged that a sort of small *fête-champêtre* should be held on the wooded banks between Worsley and Melcomb, at which the young people of both families were to be present. Julia looked forward with hope to this gathering. Richard would of course be there, and then all would be made smooth again; but in this she was disappointed, though Alice and Clarissa Brent duly made their appearance, and with them their brother Charles.

From them it was that Julia first heard of Richard's departure, and her vexation at the news did not escape his brother's observation, who, with a mind bent on still teasing the poor girl, set himself to account for the expedition by a suitable motive. He did so with eminent success, and his mysterious hints with reference to the lady (an old attachment of his elder brother's), whose attractions might have something to do with this sudden journey, and of the possibility of a speedy acquisition to the Brent family, silly and transparent as they were, were daggers to her.

So the little merry-making, which gave so much delight to all else concerned in it, was worse than a blank to Julia. The day was perfect for such a gathering, but she took no delight in it. There was but one thing that gave her any consolation, and that was the absence of the Rev. Septimus Howker, whom Charles had announced as on his way to join the party, there to

deliver an exhaustive lecture on the antiquities of Norbury Mounds.

Of course he said this to tease Julia, or at least to raise a titter at her expense. He had no spite against her, but some object for his raillery was necessary to him, and she was the one whom Fate had delivered into his hands. All the afternoon his persecutions were continued; and even a little before the party broke up, when all were seated on the grass, and he was asked to sing, before he began he threw a wicked look at Julia, as much as to inform her and the company that his lay should be suited to her forlorn and forsaken condition. The song was as follows, and I have reason to believe that it was of his own writing:—

"You meet my own with a kinder eye,
You speak in a tone more low,
Than when we went maying in days gone by
And you gave me a saucy 'No'—
A 'no,' with a laugh at the saying,
And a toss of each glossy braid;
But I am older since we went maying,
Since we went maying, proud maid.

"And the river banks, that were so bright,
Are dry with the rustling reed;
And the flowers, that were red, and yellow, and white
Are grey with the sober seed;
And the lambs have ceased their playing,
And the birds sit dumb in the shade;
And you were younger when we went maying,
When we went maying, proud maid."

It was a foolish song, and had no especial bearing upon her peculiar troubles; and yet, if her pride would have allowed it, Julia could have burst into tears before it was finished. Poor child! she was glad when the whole affair was over, and she could cry to her heart's content in the seclusion of her own room.

Unconscious as was Charles Brent of the mischief he was doing, he had given poor Julia a deep and cruel wound. After all she had gone through during the last three days, the foolish nonsense that he had uttered about the object of his brother's

journey to London had all the weight and bitterness of truth. And why, indeed, should it not be true? She had driven her lover away in such a manner as must have sorely grieved and offended him. She had driven him from the neighbourhood evidently in that state of desperation in which men marry women for whom they care nothing. It was quite likely that he would do such a desperate act as his brother had hinted at, and so be lost to her for ever.

With such thoughts as these she tormented herself all that night. The next day she was wretchedly ill. Poor little Julia! more troubles and annoyances had been crowded into the last few days than she had known in the whole of her previous uneventful life, and her delicate organisation gave way under them. A few days later, and it was understood that she was suffering from a nervous fever.

When Charles Brent learnt that Julia was actually ill, his conscience suggested that his own folly must partly, if not wholly, have been the cause. To do Charles justice, he was miserable under this reflection, and did all that lay in his power to make amends. He wrote to his brother, fully detailing the tricks he had played, and asking his pardon. Nor did he shrink from the yet more painful task of making his confessions and apologies to Julia, with whom he sought an interview as soon as she was able to see him.

On this occasion Charles said what he had to say with a candour and a delicacy which did him honour; and yet I am bound to admit that the culprit suffered far the less keenly of the two. It was difficult for Julia, in going through this series of mistakes and misconceptions, to avoid in some degree laying open the state of her own feelings; and yet she shrank nervously from the idea of in any way making a confidant of Charles Brent.

Yet Charles behaved well and tenderly, for he was much touched by her pale cheeks and thin, white fingers, and felt that he had acted like a heartless, good-for-nothing dog. He was now as anxious to soothe as ever he had been to tease her, and would have given much for the power to repair the mischief he had caused.

There was one way in which he thought he might do something; and with all the caution and tact of which he was master, he hinted that Julia's mind might be more set at rest by his brother's returning to Melcomb, which could be ensured by a summons from himself. But in making this suggestion he went too far. Julia's delicacy was touched; the colour mounted suddenly into her wan cheeks; and she peremptorily forbade him to take any such step.

VII.—A LOVE TEST.

TO Julia Heatherby, in her weak and shattered state, this interview with Charles Brent proved over-exciting. It was long that night before she could sink to sleep, and when she did so, it was not into quiet repose, but into the restless slumber of the somnambulist. For a little while she passed into forgetfulness, which, as it seemed to her, lasted the whole night; it was, as she thought, morning, and she awoke.

As she did so, Momus, her poor neglected Momus, came to her bedside, carrying a letter which she knew well to be from Richard Brent. She trembled as she opened it, for she feared it was only to tell her that he renounced her for ever; and as she read it, she wept plentifully, for it upbraided her with her injustice towards him, and asked her by what right she could again look for his love; "and yet," so she thought it ran on, "and yet I will prove whether in your capricious heart there is any true love for me. This very morning I shall await you in Hilworth Church. Come to me simple and alone, and the priest shall be ready to unite us; but if, half-an-hour before noon, you are not there, I shall have gone away, and for ever."

To Julia, in her dream, it seemed that when she read this letter, she had no feeling of pride nor of rebellion; she rather accepted with thankfulness this trial of love. Quickly and stealthily she rose up, and, dressing herself in white, as fitted the errand on which she was bound, crept softly from her chamber,

and down the stairs. All was silent—not a soul was stirring; and, unheard, she unbarred a door, and stood in the open air.

She felt the damp night wind blow coldly upon her burning temples, and, piercing through her thin, white garment, it made her shiver, but it did not wake her; in her disturbed brain there was at that moment no room but for a single idea—namely, that for her everything depended on reaching Hilworth before the appointed time.

The closed flowers were all sleeping quietly in their beds—as she, poor child! should have been in hers—when she glided through the little gate of the bowling-green, and out into the open fields. The uplands, with their fringes of tall trees, were shining beneath the low moon, as she walked rapidly upwards by the footpath which led to the hill-top. Close beneath the crown of the hill was an old stone-quarry—a rough, precipitous chasm, showing some thirty feet of sheer descent. In her waking moments, she would have shuddered and stood aghast to approach it; but now she walked steadily within a hand's-breadth of the brink, and had no thought of fear; and so passed on across the bleak and windy down.

Beyond the open summit of the hill, a dark, lonely lane led downwards; she passed through it, and out upon the meadows by the river-side.

A heavy mist lay along the stream, and wrapped the adjacent lowlands in its thick and chilly folds. The long grass of the meadows was dank with dew, and drenched her feet and garments; yet she hardly felt it, and did not stop nor turn aside.

Presently the path approached nearer to the river, and skirted the water's edge; it was a deep, smooth stream there, above the mill, fringed with sedges and tall spikes of crimson flowers. Even in her sleep she was dimly conscious of the cool, quiet, beautiful death, which lay lurking so near to her, that a false step would have flung her helpless into its embrace—she was dimly conscious of it, for the cries of the startled moor-hens sank faintly into her sleep-bound ears, and she raised her eyes as the reflection of the moon upon the surface struck them with an unwonted lustre; but it filled her with no terror—it did not awake her.

She passed the mill, where everything was hushed and quiet now, save a faint plashing of water as it dripped lazily over the idle wheel; beyond, the passage of the deeper stream was by a single plank, from which, but the day before, the handrail had been broken. For a moment she seemed to be aware of the danger, and paused; but soon, as though the pressing need of hastening to her trysting place came suddenly upon her, she gave a start, and, folding her arms, walked calmly over; after this, the river was more shallow, and crossed by stepping-stones.

These she took unhesitatingly one by one, never failing in her balance, and never slipping, slippery as they were with wet and slimy mosses; yet she knew of some feeling of weariness when she reached the opposite side, but it was overpowered by the necessity for hurrying onwards; and without stopping, she passed on by the highway leading up the bank to the village of Hilworth, straight before her.

The windows of the village street shone brightly as she went by them, but not with warm light from within; all their inmates were hushed and buried in sleep, and their brilliance was but the cold reflection of the moonlight.

White and ghastly the walls of the old church glimmered down upon her as she entered the graveyard. She hastened to the porch, but the doors were closed. She alone of the living was within the sacred enclosure, and, overcome by weariness, she leaned her arms upon a gravestone, and stood for a moment to rest. As she did so, a deep, measured sound smote upon her ear. It was the church clock. She heard it, noted it, counted every stroke. A great tremor seized her as the eleventh blow fell. Could it be that the hour was past? would it strike again? Again the stroke descended, and in her agony, with a cry of "Too late!" Julia awoke.

Awoke to become conscious that it was a dream, but not all a dream—to know that she, cold and wet with the winds and dews, was standing there alone in the midnight churchyard; and as all this came upon her, with a shriek of terror she sank fainting to the ground.

VIII.—SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT.

CHARLES BRENT'S suggestion, that he should write for the purpose of recalling his brother to Melcomb, was wholly unneeded; the letter which we have already seen him write was quite sufficient for the purpose. Change of scene had not produced the results which Richard Brent had hoped for. In London he had determined to entirely shake off his weakness for that wayward little flirt, Julia Heatherby. But this he found to be altogether out of the question. That quaint, pretty, provoking little face would be always before him. Even whilst he still had reason to believe she had been unjust, if not actually false to him, the desire to see her again had grown so strong, that he had meditated putting an end to his voluntary banishment. But on receiving his brother's letter he determined to return at once.

Slight as had been the mention made by Charles of Julia's declining health, it greatly alarmed and troubled her lover. Now that the whole matter was known to him, he charged himself with having been the cause of her serious illness, possibly of her death. Possibly—probably of her death, for Charles had spoken of there being cause for alarm, and he evidently had tried to make the best of the matter. And what if she did die! how then would he, Richard Brent, ever forgive himself? She might be dying even then—he might reach home only to find her a corpse.

It was with such thoughts as these that Richard Brent rode on his solitary way towards Melcomb. His first day's journey was a tolerably easy one, for the morning was far advanced before he was able to start, and he found it necessary to rest for the night at High Wycomb. It was on the second day that he found these gloomy apprehensions most oppressive. Constantly the idea of finding Julia dead recurred to him; and whenever the thought arose, he pressed still more rapidly homewards.

It had been his intention to stay the night at a small town some fifteen miles from Melcomb, for he rode his own horse, which would probably be overdone by the whole distance; more

over, he could have no hope of reaching his home before the Melcomb household had retired to rest, for his coming was, as the reader is aware, wholly unexpected. It was about sunset when he alighted at his hostelry, and giving orders that his horse should be littered down for the night, he entered the house.

It was the hour when gloomy thoughts are most apt to be oppressive, and now that he was no longer in action—no longer pressing forward—he found his apprehensions grow more intolerable than they had been throughout the day. To drive them away he threw up the window and looked out. It had been market-day, and groups of country people still lingered in the street. Just opposite to the window were the base and shaft of an old stone market-cross. A knot of rustics talking together were clustered round its steps, and as Richard watched them, an itinerant ballad-singer paused near them, and began to chant one of those melancholy ditties which have ever had so great a charm for the English lower classes. The words might have been current for generations, but they were new to him, and he listened with an attentive ear. They ran somewhat in this manner :—

"Both old and young the churchyard throng,
The church is deckt within,
She passeth to the porch along
With all her proper kin.
Up, bridegroom, now, for should'st not thou
Be jocund at her side?—
Ah, well-a-way the merry may
That should have been thy bride!

"No sound of wedding bells is here,
No marriage mirth, I wis;
The solemn knell, so slow and clear,
Is heard, but only this.
With pall and bier for bridal gear
She comes, the grave is wide—
Ah, well-a-way the merry may
That should have been thy bride!

"With lips wherein thou didst delight,
That others might not touch,

The channering worm, in thy despite,
Must dally overmuch.
Wilt thou wax red with jealous dread,
And cross him in thy pride?—
Ah, well-a-way the merry may
That should have been thy bride!

"The hands that were for thee alone,
The dainty cheeks so fair,
Foul clay, with many a mouldering bone,
Must, mingling, smutch them there.
The ghastly dead, whom thou dost dread,
She lieth down beside—
Ah, well-a-way the merry may
That should have been thy bride!'

Richard Brent could listen no more; he closed the window with a shudder, and, for a few moments, rapidly paced backwards and forwards through the room. He had taken a new resolution; ringing the bell, he gave orders that a fresh horse should be got ready for him as quickly as possible, and that his own should be sent on to Melcomb in the morning. He then swallowed a few mouthfuls of the supper which was now ready, rather for form's sake than for any desire he now felt to eat; and having paid his reckoning, was soon mounted again, and on the road.

At the time he halted, the twilight was already closing in; and now, when he again set forth, the summer night was fairly begun. For the season, it was a dark one; the sky had become clouded at sunset, and the moon had not risen; consequently, for all his impatience, the pace at which Mr. Richard Brent proceeded was necessarily a slow one.

Presently the clouds broke, and the moon, which was but little past the full, rose slowly above the hills in all her majesty. To save distance, our horseman travelled by cross-country roads, along which, after the first few miles had been passed, he neither met nor expected to meet with any belated wayfarer. Except for the occasional hooting of an owl, all the land was still as death; the tired peasants had long since sank to sleep beneath their thatched roofs; and the moon and Richard Brent—she above and he below—had apparently the whole creation very

much to themselves. To him such a ride would have been perfect enjoyment, but for the gloomy apprehensions which were ever gnawing at his heart. He had ridden many miles since he had heard eleven tolled from a distant steeple, and was now entering the village of Hilworth; as he came near to the church the clock struck twelve.

Richard Brent was somewhat less superstitious than most men of his time. Yet tell me, gentle reader, whether you, however enlightened you may be, have ever passed in solitude by a churchyard, when the midnight hour has been tolled, without casting a half-frightened glance among the graves to assure yourself that no uncanny thing was abroad? Such a glance did Richard Brent cast, and as he did so, he could scarcely believe his eyes, for they rested on a white figure, which suddenly threw its arms in the air, and with a shriek disappeared; startling his horse, which reared and snorted, and leaving him breathless with astonishment.

For a moment he was staggered, but only for a moment, for he was no coward; in the next he had leaped down, tied his bridle to the churchyard gate, and bounded across the hillocks to the spot where the white phantom had vanished, determined, if it might be, to make out the mystery. The spectre had not dissolved into thin air; he saw a female figure stretched behind a grave-stone; he stooped down, and—oh, gracious heavens!—its face was that of Julia Heatherby.

IX.—MORNING.

WHEN, in the uncertain light of the moon, the features of Julia Heatherby were first recognised by her lover, it seemed to him, in the bewilderment of the moment, that she must indeed have passed from earth, and that her spectre was there to upbraid him. Yet, strange, almost incredible as it was to find her at such an hour and in such a place, he was soon convinced that it was indeed none other than Julia, and Julia in substantial flesh and blood. Unconscious indeed, cold and wet

with the dews of night, but still his own Julia. He raised the lifeless figure in his arms, and endeavoured to restore it to animation; yet so long without success, that he began to fear that his worst apprehensions were about to prove true.

At last her eyes opened, and rested upon him, but only for a moment; then they closed again. She could not realise his presence; it seemed to her that she must still be dreaming; gradually only the sound of his voice convinced her of the truth. It was a strange meeting to which they had come by strange ways; her own path thither had been one upon which it was a terror to look back; and yet now, when his arms were round her, when she heard from his own lips the assurances of his love, she hardly regretted the perils which had led to such an end.

The inmates of a farm-house were soon aroused, and thither Richard Brent carried his precious charge, who appeared to him to be so much exhausted, so fragile and ill, that he still feared he had only recovered his treasure to lose it again. Here she was tenderly cared for, and as soon as her lover had assured himself that every attention would now be paid to her, he again mounted and rode to Worsley, at which place he arrived shortly after Julia's absence had been discovered, and in time to dispel the fears of her relatives before their alarm had become excessive.

But over one so delicate as Julia Heatherby the exposure and terrors of that dreadful night could not pass without doing disastrous work. They resulted in an illness which lasted for several weeks, but in this illness there were circumstances in her favour which had been wanting in the former one—her troubled mind was now at rest, and her lover was restored to her. Under these influences she in time resumed her wonted looks and gaiety of disposition.

Her marriage with Richard Brent, which soon followed her recovery, was not solemnised in privacy, and at Hilworth, as suggested by her dreaming fantasy, but, as was more fitting, in Worsley Church, and in the presence of the members and friends of both families.

INTERLOGUE III.

FROM those old times in which Piers Oversley met with his death near the Old Stone Hunting Lodge, that building and its vicinity were believed by the peasantry to be haunted by a spectral figure clad in a green hunting dress. The tragical circumstances under which that unhappy gentleman lost his life were quite sufficient to have given rise to such a superstition in the first place; and the fears of belated rustics, which might easily transform a bush or a passing shadow into the dreaded Green Huntsman, were enough to keep the belief alive. The story of Piers Oversley also had in itself enough of horror to make it attractive, and was told by the cottage hearths on winter evenings from generation to generation. Thus, from time to time during the succeeding centuries, there would ever and anon be a report that the Green Huntsman had again been seen; and then, if it were possible, the reputed haunts of the spectre would be shunned still more sedulously than before.

Fortunately for the nerves of the Melcomb peasants, they had little occasion to visit this dreaded spot even in the day-time, for, with its whole environs, it had now become a perfect wilderness. The Gothic lodge, the little sylvan meadow, and the bubbling well of St. Eustace had no longer any claim even to the neglected beauty which they possessed in the days of Isabel Brent. The lodge was now a ruin; the well, with its edging of white stones,

was so choked with weeds and rubbish as to be almost undistinguishable from the swamp which surrounded it; and the whole hollow had grown into a thick covert of thorns and brambles. As to St. Eustace, his place knew him no more, and his ancient domains were now unknown except as "The Haunted Hollow."

For a considerable period nothing had been heard of the spectral Green Huntsman, but some two years after the conclusion of the last narrative, and in the early summer of 1716, it began to be noised about that this apparition had again been seen. The rumour attracted some attention from the fact that the spectre was reported to have been met with several times in rapid succession, and by various persons; whilst the narratives of those who affected to have seen it bore such a show of truth as to gain credence with many of the better sort of people.

But before speaking further on this matter, I must mention certain changes which had, in these two years, taken place in the domestic relations of the Melcomb family. Richard Brent had married Julia Heatherby, and was now living at a distance. Charles, now a dragoon, though usually with his regiment, was at the time mentioned on leave of absence, and making a short visit to his father. Their two sisters were still unmarried, but, as was then usual, only one of them was residing at Melcomb.

Shortly after the wedding of Richard Brent, the only sister of his father, who had married a gentleman in one of the northern shires, became a widow; and as she was childless, and had been left mistress of a good estate, she thought proper to require the constant presence of one of her two nieces. In the summer of which I am about to speak, Clarissa alone was at Melcomb, whither she had lately returned from the North; the inmates of the Manor House at that time were therefore Mr. Brent, with his youngest son and daughter.

THE GHOST OF THE HAUNTED HOLLOW.

I.—THE KEEPER'S STORY.

IT was half-past seven o'clock, and breakfast-time at Melcomb. Miss Clarissa Brent was presiding at the tea equipage, which had recently become the rival, though not yet the successor, of the tankard; whilst her father, at the other end of the table, was letting fall sundry strictures on the depravity of modern ways and town habits, chiefly with relation to his son Charles, who had not yet appeared. As he was dilating more largely than usual upon this subject, he had failed to observe that Clarissa, whose altered looks had of late been one of his favourite troubles, appeared more pale and haggard than ever this morning; and she, who seemed to have a nervous dread of his remarks about her health, was glad to be thus enabled to escape notice.

Whether he would have turned to this topic when the first was exhausted, I cannot say; but, fortunately for Clarissa, a new diversion occurred. A servant entered, announcing that Josiah Woodcock, the gamekeeper, was below, and that he desired to speak with his master.

"Ask his business, and tell me what he has to say," answered the Squire, shortly.

In another moment the servant returned. "He says, sir, that what he has to tell is for your ears, and for yours alone."

"Well, then, bid him come hither;" and then, turning to his daughter, the Squire went on—"Caught a poacher again, no doubt; some one whom he thinks I shall not care to prosecute. Well, Woodcock," to the keeper, who had now entered the room, and stood, hat in hand, making a succession of short bobs—"and who hast thou caught teaching my hares to wear brass collars?"

Josiah made another bob with his head, but glanced towards Clarissa, and hesitated before answering.

"Nonsense," said the Squire; "if it were Burridge now, the constable, the chances are that his business would not be fit for my daughter to hear; but there can be no harm in thine. Out with it, man! Who or what hast thou to tell me about?"

"Whether it is who or what, your worship," answered Woodcock, solemnly, "is more than I know or can tell."

"Well, well; I suppose you must take your own way to tell your tale. Go on with it, only make it as short as you can."

Thus chartered, the keeper cleared his throat, and began. "Last night, your worship, I was going my rounds, as usual. I started down by the water-side, then through Skinner's Gorse, over the West Hill, and down by the Humble-bee Coppice. From there I came along by the bottom of The Wood, towards the Haunted Hollow, and just as I got there, I heard a sound——"

Josiah stopped short, it was his way to make points in this manner; and as he looked round, he was much pleased to observe that Miss Clarissa was listening to his story with quite breathless interest. As for the Squire, he only said testily, "Well, and what did you hear?"

"As I was saying," continued Woodcock, "when I came to the bottom of the wood, towards the Haunted Hollow, I heard a sound which I knew well enough, for I had often heard it before——"

"Humph! and what was it?" enquired his master.

"It was the skriekin' of a foumart in a trap," continued Josiah, heedless of the interruption. "So I killed the vermin, and set the trap again. It was a dog foumart, and the biggest I have caught this year."

"And have you come here, then, to tell me nothing but this story of a weasel?" broke in the Squire.

"No, your worship," went on the keeper, quite unmoved by his master's testiness, to which he was well accustomed, and in no wise regarded. "No, your worship; I saw something else after killing the foumart, but nothing to speak of, till I had come round by the end of The Wood, and across the bottom of the hollow, below the Old Lodge place. At that time, I reckon (for the wind was the wrong way, and I could not hear the church clock), it must have been very near upon midnight. I myself was keeping under cover, as I mostly do on moonlight nights; so, without being seen myself, I could see quite plain everything that moved in the open."

Here Woodcock made another pause, which elicited an interrogatory, "Well?" from his master. Clarissa was still listening with an eagerness which the tedium of the keeper's story scarcely seemed to warrant.

"As I stood looking," he again went on, "all of a sudden I saw something move out from among the trees, and come towards me. I say it moved, for it seemed to slide along more than to walk, and I could see it quite plain in the moonlight; and as sure as I stand here, the thing was like a man, all in strange old-fashioned clothes, such as I never saw before, but like as pin to pin to what one hears talk of the Green Huntsman, your worship."

"Well, and is this all?" asked Mr. Brent, in an incredulous tone.

"No, your worship, not quite. As I said before, there was the Green Huntsman coming towards me, and as it got nearer and nearer, somehow I began to have a curious sort of feeling, which I couldn't well understand."

"Nay, nay, man, but I understand it well enough!" broke in the Squire.

"If your worship means to say that I was frightened," retorted Josiah, "it was nothing of the sort, but it was a creepy feeling. Do you think, if I'd been afraid, I should have done as I did; for I up with the old double-barrel, and levelled at the thing, and—but Lord, sir! I've no business to speak of such matters before young madam; it seems to have quite upset her."

He was right; Clarissa had turned deadly pale. Now, however, she said, with a faint laugh, that it was nothing, and bade the keeper go on with his narrative.

"As I was saying, I took a sure aim and pulled the trigger, so the charge must have gone clean through him. But instead of falling dead, as was reasonable for flesh and blood to do, the thing kept straight on towards me; and as I could see no reason in wasting more good powder and shot, I thought it better to turn round and leave the Green Huntsman to himself."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Squire. "Thou wast not frightened, Woodcock; yet I will wager that thou didst show as clean a pair of heels to the ghost as ever poacher showed to thee. But now," altering his tone, "since you saw this Green Huntsman so plainly, tell me, as nearly as you can, what he was like?"

"To speak the truth, sir, when the feeling came over me, I seemed flabberghasted, and could not remember much to swear to. Only, the thing had a curious dress, green all over—cap and all—such as nobody would think of wearing now-a-days."

"And have you told this story to anyone but myself?"

"Why, you see, your worship, I took it to be my duty to let you hear what I had seen at once; so I kept it quite to myself, barring only a word or two to my wife, and——"

"Well, that will do," said the Squire; "now take care that this matter goes no farther till I have spoken to you again. I shall have it looked into thoroughly. You can now go;" and the keeper withdrew.

"My dear Clarissa," Mr. Brent resumed, as soon as they were alone, "your behaviour this morning has annoyed me greatly. The absurd interest you have shown in this cock-and-bull story is calculated to give an impression that you put faith in these degrading superstitions. Woodcock's relation is circumstantial; he has not been scared by a bush or his own shadow, and therefore it will do all the more harm if not exposed. A trick has been played on him; yet, if the impostor who is playing the ghost thinks to include me among his dupes, he will find out his mistake to his cost. I will have the matter thoroughly shown up."

II.—A MIDNIGHT WATCH.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Brent had, as we have seen, a somewhat short and irritable temper, he was a man of clear judgment and much determination. He was not only a professed, but a real disbeliever in the whole pack of vulgar superstitions; and if he had a mission, he believed that it lay in putting them down. Hitherto he had contented himself with laughing at the stories which told of the reappearance of the Green Huntsman; but now, when he believed he saw that it was something more than a delusion—that there was deception beneath it—he rejoiced in the prospect of exposing and putting down the bugbear, once and for ever.

When Charles Brent sauntered into the breakfast-room, he listened to the whole history of Woodcock's adventure, and was quite ready to join his father in laughing at the keeper's credulity and want of courage. Every young man is prepared to scout any suspicion of deficiency in the latter quality, and our friend Charles, who was as ready as another to assert his own valour, at once declared himself ready to watch for, and, if need be, to encounter, the so-called ghost.

At the moment when he made this offer, he scoffed at the idea of desiring any other companion than a stout cudgel; but as the evening drew near, it occurred to him that he might do well to avail himself of that knowledge of the spectre's haunts which the keeper had already acquired; and for that reason, though of course for no other, he would allow Woodcock to share his vigil.

Whether, when Josiah Woodcock was summoned to accompany his young master, he was greatly charmed with his office, it is not my part to say; but forth they sallied, with a trusty ash plant of the keeper's providing in the hand of each.

The moon, which was just rising as they climbed the hill in the direction of the ruined lodge, glimmered on them with a low, uncertain light as they stood on that point of the crown of the bank, often alluded to before, where Piers Oversley had met his death. This had, of course, the reputation of being one of the

haunted places, but nothing now was to be seen or heard, and the watchers debated in low whispers on the propriety of descending to the ruin beneath them. The proposal to do so came from Charles, but it was discouraged by Woodcock, who pointed out that it would be impossible for them, by the present light, to find the steep pathway, which was now so overgrown as to be next to impassable even by day.

Accordingly, instead of attempting to reach the lodge, they passed along the brow of the hill to beyond the end of the wood, and then, by an easier descent, they approached the little rivulet which took its rise from the well of St. Eustace. This route, of course, brought them near to the scene of Woodcock's adventure of the preceding night; but here, too, everything was quiet.

The calm, bright night, and the absence of anything to cause alarm, were calculated to raise the spirits and inspire confidence, as was also the small flask of brandy which the young soldier had recently produced; and about this time Charles Brent began to be troubled with a suspicion that his having brought a companion on this expedition might possibly cause his courage to be called in question.

Now for the amount of valour, whatever it might be, which our budding hero possessed, he reasonably enough desired to have full credit. He suggested, therefore, that the keeper and himself should at this point part company. Separately, they would see more and be less liable to be seen, besides being enabled at the same time to keep watch in two distinct directions.

Woodcock was slow to see the force of these arguments, but nevertheless Charles ordered him to remain on the nearer side of the little stream, whilst he himself would cross the brook, and steal round by the farther side of the wood. Half-an-hour after midnight they were to meet again—the Boundary Oak, the scene in old times of the encounter between Piers Oversley and Gilbert Brent, being the appointed place of rendezvous.

Yet when Charles Brent found himself quite alone, creeping onwards under the shadow of the cover-side, the night seemed to have assumed an aspect quite different to that which it had worn when he had a fellow-creature by his side. There was

something weird and ghastly in the low sighing of the wind through the trees, and in the dark, fantastic shadows cast by the moon. Midnight, too, was fast approaching, and the hour when all ghostly things have a prescriptive right more especially to terrify mankind. Now Charles, though he would never have pleaded guilty to such a weakness, held no such decided views on the impossibility of spectres as his strong-minded father, and was in the bottom of his heart quite inclined to believe in the Green Huntsman. On the whole, therefore, he resolved that, instead of pushing forward to the farther side of the wood, every purpose of his vigil might as well be answered by his pursuing a track along the right bank of the rivulet, and, consequently, at no great distance from the beat which Woodcock was to take.

This route would have brought him in almost a direct line to the place of meeting, but as more than half-an-hour must elapse before Woodcock, proceeding by the path assigned him, could possibly be there, he endeavoured to kill the intervening time by walking slowly and frequently standing still.

One of his halts was beneath a large clump of trees, and as sensations of sleep now began to come over him, he leant his back against one of the trunks, and closed his eyes. He was gradually sinking into a state of oblivion, when a low sound recalled him, with a sudden start, to himself. It was a sound as of footsteps approaching softly over the decaying leaves. Bright as was the moonlight in the open fields, all was dark beneath the trees; and he could make out nothing but the indistinct outline of a human figure. He knew that Woodcock's path lay by the farther side of the hill, and who else could be passing here except one, and that one was the being whom he did not doubt but that he now saw, namely, the Green Huntsman.

He started forward; the figure stopped. He raised his cudgel, but as he did so, the indefinite feeling that he was in the presence of a supernatural being seemed to render him powerless, and his arm dropped again; another moment, and the consciousness that it was folly to offer violence to a being of the other world was too much for him. In short, he turned round and

fairly took to his heels, never stopping till he stood beside the shattered trunk of the old Boundary Oak.

Before he had fairly regained his wind, the keeper also came up, breathless with speed. "I've seen him again, Master Charles!" were his first words, as soon as he could speak.

"Who?" said Charles; "the Green Huntsman?"

"Ay, sir, sure enough. After leaving you, I turned up the hill again, and watched for some time among the trees; and then, thinks I, if there's roguery afoot, I'm more like to see it down in the hollow than beyond the bank, so I just came quietly down the side of the meadow till I reached Brookend Clumps."

"Down to Brookend Clumps!" repeated Charles, an uncomfortable suspicion beginning to dawn upon him.

"Just so, sir; and as I was coming under the trees, all of a sudden the thing started up out of the ground, right in front of me. I couldn't see much, to be sure, there, in the dark; but I knew that it was the Green Huntsman. At me it came, with its hunting-pole lifted, and I was so taken aback that I never thought of using my stick, but only tried to recollect a prayer or two; and it was well for me that I did so, for as soon as I began to repeat one, the thing vanished away as suddenly as it came."

As Josiah Woodcock proceeded with his narrative, the alarm of our friend Charles had gradually given place to a feeling of merriment, and at its close he broke into a laugh. "Woodcock," he said, as the keeper finished, "we two wise men have been making consummate asses of each other. It was I, coming from behind a tree, that alarmed you. Never mind; I was quite as much frightened as you were, and ran away faster, as my getting here first shows. Well, this must be a lesson to us; we shall not be so easily scared again, shall we?"

It took Woodcock some moments to swallow the unpalatable truth; but when he had fairly digested it, he said, in a tone of some disgust, "I tell you what, Master Charles; after being fooled in this way, I should just like to see the ghost, really and truly; and be he man or be he devil, he should have a taste of my stick."

"Yes," said Charles, "we shall be more on our mettle now."

As he spoke, the clock of Melcomb Church tolled twelve.

The vibrations of the last stroke had scarcely died away, before a thrill of awe passed through the two listeners; for, as though answering to its echoes, the faint note of a horn was heard in the direction of Melcomb Wood. They gazed up the meadow towards the spot whence the sound proceeded. Under the moon, now shining in all her splendour, the open greensward lay bright and light as day, and from among the trees, on one side of the hollow, they saw a figure emerge—a figure plainly visible, and in all respects answering to the description of the Green Huntsman—and pass slowly to the other side, where it again disappeared among the shadows.

Whilst it was in sight, the two men stood gazing on it as if rooted to the ground; but as soon as it had vanished, Woodcock asked, "Shall we follow it, Master Charles?"

"No," said Charles, with a shudder; "we have seen enough for to-night. Let us go home."

III.—THE MYSTERY UNSOLVED.

AT the next morning's breakfast-table, Charles Brent made his appearance in very tolerable time, and gave a frank relation of all that had happened on the preceding night.

The mutual blunder of Woodcock and himself he thought proper to place in a ludicrous light, and he was by no means abashed at the hearty laughter in which his father indulged at his expense. But when he came to speak of the apparition at midnight, and to admit that he inclined to think of it as an actual phantom, Mr. Brent assumed a more serious tone. "Charles," he said, "you grieve and astonish me; I am ashamed that any son of mine should confess to even thinking it possible to believe in these degrading superstitions."

"I am sorry, sir, to incur your displeasure," replied Charles, "but I only tell you what I have witnessed, and submit that I see no way of explaining this appearance so readily as by admitting the popular belief. If it can be explained otherwise, I should

be glad to have it done; but after last night's experience, I do not myself wish to undertake the solution; I have seen enough."

"And explained it shall be," said Mr. Brent, "if I have myself to visit the place every night till the imposture is exposed."

"Then, sir," replied his son, "I advise you to engage a more valorous colleague than mine of last evening."

"Do you imagine that I am to be scared by hobgoblins?" retorted his father. "I shall need none but my pistols; and this impostor had best be wary, for I shall not be slow in using them."

Although Clarissa took no part in this conversation, it must not be supposed that she was a heedless listener. The interest which the keeper's tale had excited was still apparently active in her mind, and to every word that was uttered about the Green Huntsman she gave the most marked attention. Indeed, when her father announced the above resolution, she, as was perhaps the duty of an affectionate daughter, tried her best to dissuade him from an enterprise so little suited to his time of life.

Once or twice during the day she found occasion to enter his private business-room, and to revert to the subject. On one of these visits she found him carefully loading his pistols, and as she watched the process with apparent curiosity, she again tried her dissuasive powers; but finding that she did so in vain, she begged him in any case not to venture into the rugged hollow by night, where a false step might cost him a dangerous fall. But Henry Brent's resolutions were not to be shaken: he gave her to understand that he should not only visit the hollow, but explore the ruined lodge itself. The expression of distress on Miss Brent's face when she heard this, told how much she had been bent on gaining her end.

At a still later hour, on the Squire suddenly entering his sanctum, he found his daughter awaiting him, and as she was standing close to the shelf on which he had temporarily deposited his pistols, he thought it a fit opportunity to drop a word of caution on the danger of inexperienced persons touching fire-arms; to which Clarissa quietly acquiesced. He had expected that she was come to revert to their former subject of conversation, but he was mistaken; she merely wished to speak about

some little household matter; and as she went out immediately afterwards for a long walk in the grounds, he was not again teased with her girlish apprehensions.

The other members of his family had retired to rest when, buttoning himself tightly in his surtout, and stowing his weapons in a convenient pocket, Mr. Brent took his way in the direction of the dreaded hollow. Although he was now verging upon threescore, and had lost much of the physical activity for which he had been remarkable in earlier life, Henry Brent was still strong and vigorous, and the energy of his mind might be said to make up for any falling off in his bodily powers. Many years had passed by since he had visited the spot for which he was now bound; and as he forced his way through the tangled thickets, he had to rely for guidance on his recollections of the locality when a young and enthusiastic sportsman; for the low moon cast no light as yet into this deep hollow, and the ancient pathway had long since been overgrown and lost.

"The fayre and goodley Lodge of St. Eustace," as I find it described in an old deed—shunned and neglected as it had been for centuries—was now a mere ruin; its traceried windows shattered, and its stone roof in many places broken through. Rising, as it did, in its desolation, from the midst of thorns and brambles, it looked ghastly and melancholy enough in the wan moonlight; and Henry Brent, as he stood before it, could not help admitting that anyone less free from superstitious fancies than himself might have been pardoned for letting some feeling of ghostly awe creep through him at such a sight.

To within a few yards of the building Mr. Brent's progress had been made with difficulty, but he found, rather to his surprise, that there was now a tolerably open pathway to the door. After spending a few moments in quietly surveying the outside, he stepped to the archway that he might pass within.

But here, for the first time, he met with a serious obstruction. The passage was completely choked with thorns, and the stones and rubbish of the dilapidated building, so that he could get no farther. He was not a little nettled at this hindrance. He had made up his mind to spend midnight in the ruined lodge; and

by so doing, to show to the cowardly and superstitious people around him how great was his contempt for such weaknesses as theirs. Midnight would shortly strike; and here was he, baffled and stopped on the very threshold.

Completely undaunted by the ghastly look of the place, and by the deathlike silence which prevailed around, he at once began to remove the obstacles which impeded him. The task was a more serious one than he had anticipated, and a quarter of an hour must have passed by before he had made any sensible progress in clearing the way, or, indeed, in doing anything beyond scratching his hands, and exhausting his always scanty stock of patience. Yet he continued his work with unabated energy, when the strokes of the village clock, announcing midnight, fell upon his ears, and as he counted them, he paused from his labours.

Hitherto the interior of the lodge had been wrapped in complete silence; but now, as he listened, he fancied that some faint indications of sound proceeded from within; a moment afterwards, and he believed he could distinguish footfalls, as of some one moving softly over the stone floor; another second, and a deep groan rang through the broken arches of the ancient building.

Strong as were his nerves, Henry Brent gave an involuntary start at this sudden and ominous sound, and he listened attentively to hear it repeated; but there was no repetition; the silence now remained wholly unbroken; and in a few minutes he began to suspect his imagination must have played him some trick, or, at the most, that the sound he had heard could only have been the screech of an owl. In this conviction he returned to his task, and again set himself strenuously to force the passage.

Scarcely, however, had he recommenced, when a slight noise from without made him spring up and turn round. There was no mistake this time. Barely six paces from the doorway, having apparently glided past him from the ruin, and now rapidly disappearing down the pathway, across which a bright gleam of moonlight by this time lay, he beheld, past all question, the figure of the Green Huntsman.

Mr. Brent was slightly startled, but his courage and promptitude in no wise faltered. He called to the apparition to stand.

There was no response, no halt; and first one, then a second pistol-shot echoed up the Haunted Hollow and through Melcomb Woods, and then all was silent again.

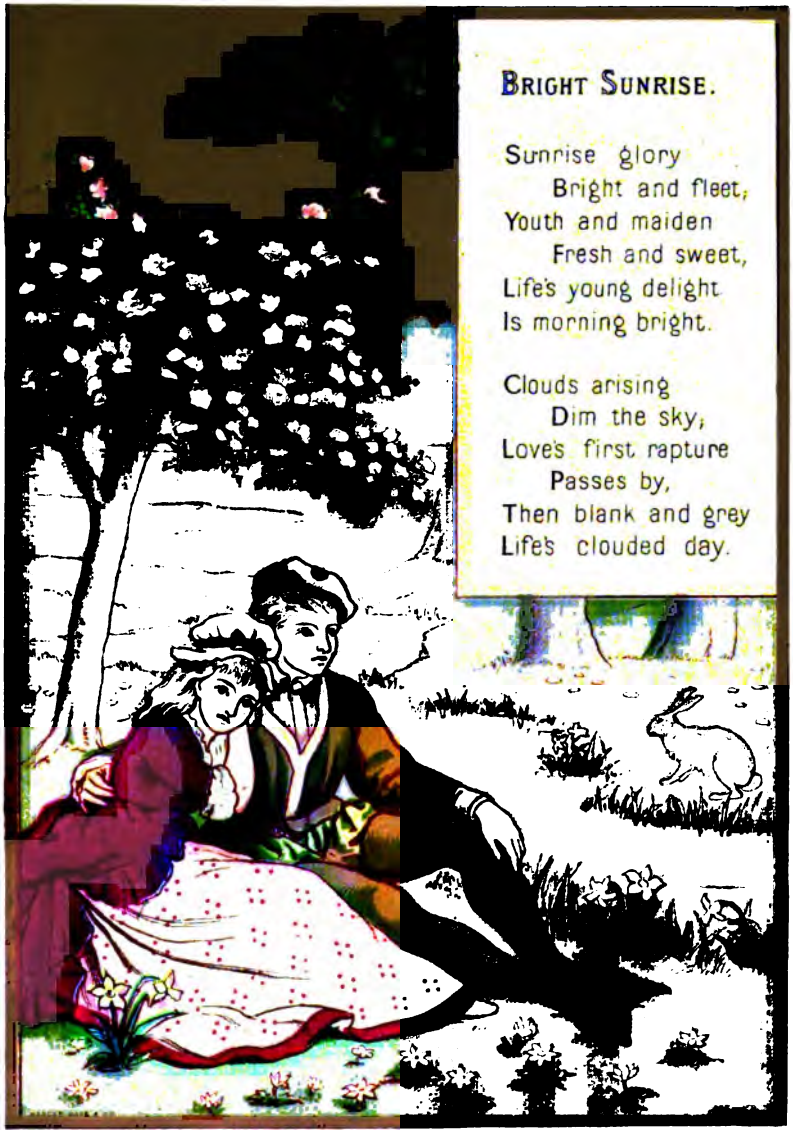
"That yonder clown, Woodcock, shut his eyes, or fired at the stars, I can more readily believe than not," said the Squire to himself, as he deliberately pulled up the cocks of his pistols, closed the pans, and bolted them again; "but that my aim was cool and steady I can make affidavit. I would have wagered Melcomb Manor on either of those two shots." So saying, he slowly took his way homeward.

IV.—A LOVERS' MEETING.

SCARCELY three hours later than the time at which my last chapter came to an end, as the earliest summer dawn was breaking, two persons were seated on the bank of the little brook, so often mentioned. The hour was a most delicious one in early June time, an hour at which the birds were all awake and singing lustily, whilst the hares were limping lazily across the sweet moist grass, and daintily picking their breakfasts here and there. Yet it was not an hour about which many of us know much from experience, for all ordinary human beings may then be relied upon as lying snugly asleep in their comfortable beds; for which very reason, indeed, the two individuals in question had chosen this time for their meeting.

One of these persons was none other than our fair friend, Miss Clarissa Brent. Her companion was a gentleman whose youthful appearance ill accorded with the terror which the wearer of his costume was in the habit of inspiring; for he was clad in the green cap and hunting-dress, of antique fashion, which tradition was wont to associate with the dreaded Green Huntsman. By listening to their conversation we may, perhaps, gain some clue to the mystery which had perplexed the owner of Melcomb and his household, if not the reader.

"Did my father pay his threatened visit to your retreat?"



A LOVERS' MEETING.

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asked Miss Brent. "I heard him return to the house; but of the results of his watch I have, of course, as yet learned nothing."

"Yes, my sweet Clarissa, I have had an interview with your father, and I must say that I have formed a high opinion of his courage and decision—of which, indeed, I was near having rather too convincing a proof. Had it not been for your wise precaution of removing the bullets from his pistols, our first meeting would also have been our last, and at this moment I should have been a genuine ghost instead of an indifferent counterfeit."

"Oh, Maurice, Maurice!" said Clarissa, "I wish you would not jest at everything, nor expose yourself in this manner to needless dangers. I told you that nothing could frighten my father, and entreated you not to encounter him. Only think if he had reloaded his pistols!"

"My wise little counsellor," was the answer, "you must not scold me. Had it been possible, I should have avoided him. Well barricaded, I kept my chamber in my ancient mansion yonder—which is, by-the-bye, from the state of its roof, a more desirable residence in dry than in wet weather, and stands much in need of repairs—I believed my castle impregnable, and, like an indolent spectre had no intention of walking earlier than the hour of our assignation. But this courageous father of yours attacked my fortress, first by storm, and then by sap. I defended myself by a volley of groans—the only artillery at my command—but the enemy was not to be repulsed; so I, like a prudent governor, fearing to be captured in my works, beat a retreat through the window, and tried to steal off unobserved by his flank. Then it was that he saw me, and opened fire; but for reasons that you know of, I was enabled to bring off my forces without casualty. There, my sweet friend, you have the whole story; and now admit that I was not to blame."

"No," she said, "I do not blame you; but I am frightened, Maurice, at the light way in which you speak of these dangers."

"Some six months of close acquaintance with peril by night and day are quite enough to entitle one to treat it with familiarity," replied the youth, laughing. "But now, my dear Clarissa, I purpose to ask for an introduction to the breakfast

you have brought for me; for, under all my troubles, my appetite still remains admirable."

As he said this, he opened the dainty little basket which Clarissa had placed on the grass; and the young lady was amused to see with what relish he began to demolish its contents. Soon, however, she assumed an air of much gravity and wisdom. "Maurice Turnbull," she said, "listen to me. Although you may be able to laugh at these dangers, I am not. Have you never thought in what a miserable state of apprehension I have lived for the last month, or how my fears have been increased since you have been so often seen, and the Green Huntsman has become common talk? And now, since my father has been incited to solve the mystery, I have been most wretched; for I know that he will never rest till you are found out. Do you not see how I am worn with anxiety? For my sake, if not for your own, you must consent to put an end to this deception."

"My dearest Clarissa," her lover answered tenderly, taking both her hands in his own, and looking in her face, "you say well. Though constant danger may have made me careless, I have no right to make you suffer; but then," and he slid back into his old light way of talking, "what am I to do? Shall I sue for the mercy of the Elector of Hanover, only to find what his clemency is worth, as so many of my friends have done, when some fine morning I am swinging in the midst of goodly company on the Tyburn Tree? If you give me up, no one else will shelter me; and I have no means of escaping abroad."

"You need not speak thus of the King," she answered. "He has pardoned your friend Charles Ratcliffe, and might pardon you; and yet the risk is too great. No, throw yourself on the generosity of my father. He is a gentleman, and will not betray the trust reposed in him. He is a brave man, and will respect your courage. And beyond this," and here Clarissa smiled, "he will be so overjoyed to find that the ghost was a delusion, that he will be in the mood to be generous. Believe me, Maurice, you will not repent if you are guided by me."

"Admirably argued, my most sage counsellor," replied Turnbull; "only, I think there are one or two points to which

you have not given their due weight. A prudent father will scarcely approve of his daughter sheltering a clandestine and proscribed lover; and a well-known staunch subject of the powers that be will consider that he has a plain duty to perform in dealing with what he will be pleased to term a rebel. It seems to me that the desire to be rid of the undesirable suitor will make the duty of handing him over to the Government so imperative, that Mr. Brent will scarcely be able to resist it."

"Maurice," said Clarissa, in a low tone, "you are partly right. My father will not approve of what I have done, and I shall have much censure, perhaps punishment, to bear; but you wrong him if you believe that he would betray a confidence to serve his own convenience, or to gratify his revenge. No; take the word of a daughter who knows him well; throw yourself on his honour, and you will be sure of such shelter and means of escape as he can command."

He considered for a little, and then said, "Clarissa, I will do as you advise."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Good," she said, rising; "I will, if possible, bring my father to the Old Lodge, and you shall speak with him before noon. Be assured you may trust him, and all will be well; except," she said, the tears rising to her eyes—"except for one consequence that will surely follow."

"And what will that consequence be?" he asked.

"A bitter one for me—but no matter—I cannot tell you. I have your promise—Adieu!" and she left him to seek the shelter of his ruin, and to ruminate on what she had said.

V.—FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

AT the ordinary hour Clarissa Brent was seated at the breakfast table as usual, and there was nothing in her appearance to raise a suspicion that for the past four hours she had not been in her bed. After her father's midnight watch, she almost

doubted whether he would appear; but she knew how high a value he placed on punctuality, and she was determined, on this momentous morning, to do nothing which might cross his temper, and thus endanger her schemes.

It was well that she did so, for he was at his seat to the minute, and showed, by his knitted brows and the silence which he maintained, that the results of his moonlight walk had not been such as to put him into his most amiable frame of mind.

Charles, as usual, did not appear; and Clarissa had hoped that, during their *tête-à-tête* over the breakfast table, her father might have spoken freely of his last night's adventures, and thus have given an easy opening for her confession. But it was not so. Mr. Brent was too thoughtful even to find fault with trifles, and scarcely uttered a word.

The meal was more than half over before Clarissa ventured timidly to ask what he had seen on the previous night, and whether he had made such discoveries as he had hoped for.

"No," he said, shortly, "I have not found out all that I intended to find out, or that I intend to find out;" and a moment or two afterwards he added, "When that sluggard, Charles, comes down, send him to my room; I shall require him to accompany me to the Old Stone Hunting Lodge at eleven o'clock. Remember that you tell him this."

Clarissa gave the required promise, and the remainder of the meal passed off in almost total silence. It was evident that this was not a favourable time at which to tell her tale.

It was not till Mr. Brent rose to leave the room that she dared in any degree to clear the way for her task; then, as he stood near the door, she went up to him, and, looking in his face, said, with a trembling voice, "Papa, I want to ask a favour of you."

He looked down at her with more tenderness than he had shown before that morning. "Well, my dear," he said, "what is it?"

"It is that, when you go to the Old Lodge this morning, I, and I alone, may go with you."

Her father's eyes opened to their widest, and then a sterner

look came over his face. "Indeed," he said, "I did not expect that you, who were so terribly scared at these hobgoblin tales, would have any wish to visit that particular spot."

"But I do wish to go, papa."

"Pooh, pooh, child! you are absurd. No woman with her ridiculous draperies can pass through the bramble brakes in the Haunted Hollow."

"But, papa, I can lead you by a perfectly open path, and I have reasons for wishing to go with you which I cannot give now. I have something to say to you, something very particular. Do promise me that I, and not Charles, may go;" and she looked up in his face with eyes of such earnest entreaty, that Henry Brent, who in his heart loved this daughter above everything beside, could not resist her.

"Well," he said, "women always get their own way, and I suppose that you must have yours. You need not deliver my message to Charles; and remember that I shall be ready at eleven—eleven to the minute."

For long past Clarissa Brent had undergone her share of suspense and anxiety; but she had never felt their pangs so keenly as for the three miserable hours which had now to be got through. Yet eleven came at last, and she set out with her father across the fields.

For a distance they walked in silence. The Squire was aware that she had something of importance to communicate, and waited for her to do so; whilst she, with a throbbing heart, trembled to open the subject, and beat hopelessly about for words in which to begin. At last she said, "Papa, you saw this spectre of the Green Huntsman last night."

"Spectre or no spectre, Clarissa, I did see a figure answering to the description of the Green Huntsman; and though I am no more a believer in the ghost to-day than I was before, I must admit that there is some mystery which has at present baffled me."

"Perhaps, papa, I can help you to unravel this mystery better than anyone else."

"Eh, what?" he exclaimed, turning sharply round upon her.

"Oh, papa, do not be angry with me. There is much that

I want to tell you. I fear that I have done what you will think very imprudent—perhaps very wrong."

I have mentioned that Henry Brent, stern and sèvere as he was to most people, had always a tender place in his heart for his youngest daughter; and this was shown at the present moment; he drew her arm gently within his own, and said, in a voice which reassured her, "Well, my child, tell me everything."

"It is more than a year ago, when I was staying at aunt's, that I met with a young gentleman of that neighbourhood, Mr. Maurice Turnbull. You know how strict and cross aunt is, and I could not tell her frankly all about it, as I am sure I should have told you had I been at home; and so we went on writing and seeing each other in secret. I knew that it was wrong, and yet somehow I seemed to drift into an engagement without meaning it. I did, indeed, wish to write and tell you more than once, but Maurice feared that you would never approve of my giving encouragement to one of his political principles. All his people are hot Jacobites; and at the rising last summer he went out with his friends. He escaped from Preston, and has since been hiding in different parts of the country; and a month since, when he could no longer find shelter elsewhere, he came here."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Brent; "I think I begin to see through the matter now."

"He came here, papa; and what could I do? I dared not tell you, and I could not refuse to help him in his distress; so for the past month he has been hiding in the Old Lodge. The ghost make-believe was all my doing. It was I who thought of disguising him thus, and I it was who procured the dress which has deceived everybody."

"And you have met with him frequently."

"Yes, papa; I confess that I have seen him daily, and supplied him with food."

"Clarissa, you are in many respects a sensible girl. Do you suppose it possible that I can approve of all this deception and underhand dealing?"

"Oh no, I know you cannot. I know I have done very

wrongly. I do not expect your approval. I only ask for your forgiveness, and your protection for poor Maurice."

"Now tell me—I must ask a delicate question—Is this young man, this young Turnbull, very dear to you? would it grieve you very deeply to give him up?"

"He is very, very dear to me, papa."

"Clarissa, neither of the things you ask are easy for me to grant. You have not acted openly, honourably, or like your father's daughter in this matter; and it is not for me to say at once, 'I forgive you,' merely because you say, 'I am sorry.' Nor is it a simple thing for me to promise protection to this young man. I cannot look with favour upon his crime—for such it is. A heavy crime I consider it, to seek to involve the land in the miseries of civil war, for no better motive than the groundless hope of restoring a dynasty which has been expelled for its inability to govern. Yet enough blood has already been shed; and, criminal as I think him, Heaven forbid that I should seek to betray him to his death. I might perhaps be able, through some of my friends, to arrange for his safe conveyance to foreign parts."

"Oh, papa! and will you do this?"

"Yes, I will promise to do so on one condition—a condition which, after what you have said, you will perhaps think hard, but one which I consider right and necessary."

She looked up in his face with streaming eyes—"Anything that I can do, any sacrifice that I can make, I am ready for, if it will purchase poor Maurice's safety."

"Of this youth," her father continued, "I know but two things—that he is a rebel, and that he has wooed my daughter in a clandestine manner; and more of such a man I care not to know. But on this point I am resolved, that such a one shall never, with my consent, have the hand of a child of mine. My condition is that, if I provide for the safety of young Turnbull, you pledge your word of honour wholly to give him up—never again to encourage his advances, nor to consider him as a lover."

This condition had been expected by Clarissa Brent. It was to this that she had looked forward with dread, but had not dared to name, at the close of her last interview with Maurice

Turnbull. She had made up her mind that it must come to this, and had thought herself prepared to make the renunciation; and yet, now when the fatal words were to be said by which the bond that united her to her lover would be severed for ever, it seemed as though she could not bring herself to utter the irrevocable promise.

At last, however, she made an effort; and, looking up with eyes full of tears, she laid her hand in his, and said firmly, "Father, I accept the condition, and pledge myself to keep it inviolate. Come what will, you shall find that you have a daughter possessed of as true a sense of honour as yourself."

VI.—RENUNCIATION.

BY a circuitous path which wound among the bramble brakes in a series of zig-zags, and one which would have utterly bewildered any uninitiated person, Clarissa led her father to the Old Stone Hunting Lodge. Arrived there, the barrier which blocked its entrance on the previous night was found to have been removed, so that the interior was reached without any difficulty whatever.

It will scarcely be necessary to repeat at full length the whole conversation which took place at this interview. Young Turnbull was expecting the arrival of his guests; and Mr. Brent informed him that the danger of his present position had already been fully explained to him, as well as the whole chain of circumstances which had resulted in his seeking Melcomb as a place of shelter. Whilst expressing much sympathy with the young man's misfortunes, he delicately abstained from making any mention of their cause, which might have brought their opposite political leanings into collision; and he concluded by offering the use of his purse and influence for the purpose of conveying the fugitive Jacobite to a place of safety beyond the seas.

This offer was accepted by Maurice Turnbull with many expressions of gratitude; and it was then arranged that a suitable

dress should be provided by Mr. Brent, together with a horse and a trusty servant, with all possible expedition; and that the youth should proceed under a feigned name to Bristol, where he would be accredited to a merchant of that city, a kinsman of the Squire's, and a person whose good offices he could command.

No sooner had this plan been agreed upon, than Mr. Brent prepared to depart. "Clarissa," he said, "you will probably have something more to say to Mr. Turnbull, as you will not have any future opportunity of meeting with him. I shall await you, ten minutes hence, on the brow of the hill;" and courteously taking leave of the young Jacobite, he left the lodge.

Then it was that, in a few heart-broken words, Clarissa Brent first told her lover of the condition on which her father's aid to his escape had been purchased, and that from that moment, under whatever circumstances they might hereafter find themselves, they must be as strangers to each other.

Even then, Maurice Turnbull would have thrown aside his hopes of flight, and faced the worst, rather than consent to such a stipulation; but Clarissa silenced his hot and hasty words. She told him, in a voice still firm amid all her tears, that it was now too late—that her promise had been given and must be kept—and that by neglecting his own safety he would only add another sorrow to her weight of misery; and conjuring him to cherish his own life for better fortunes in the future, and with one last bitter embrace, she tore herself away.

A fortnight later, Mr. Brent received a letter from his kinsman, Humphrey Daniell, merchant, of the city of Bristol, with the information that the young gentleman, Mr. Lewis Allen, who had been honoured by his recommendations, had the day before sailed for Hamburg in one of the writer's vessels, with every prospect of making a prosperous voyage.

Whether, during the years which succeeded the departure of Maurice Turnbull, Clarissa Brent thought constantly of her lost lover, or wept for him in secret, I have no means of knowing; but if she did so, she assuredly gave no outward sign of her grief; indeed, for general cheerfulness, as well as sweetness of manner, no one was more remarkable than she was. After the

wedding of her sister Alice, which shortly took place, she refused more than one advantageous offer of marriage; from which it might be argued that the hero of the Haunted Hollow still kept his place in her heart. But such was not the general opinion. The Melcomb neighbours, who certainly never knew that she had had such a lover, attributed her choice of a single life to a desire to devote herself wholly to her remaining parent, whose health at this time was rapidly declining, and whose constant nurse and companion she was.

It was in the fourth summer after the farewell scene in the Old Lodge, and at the time when her father's death was looked upon as a question of a few weeks only, that Clarissa left his sick-room to proceed on some errand of mercy to the village, and that she was accosted on her way by a gentleman of slightly foreign appearance and military bearing, in whom, though much changed, it was not difficult for her to recognise her old lover, Maurice Turnbull.

The encounter was too sudden to have permitted her to avoid him, as she might, perhaps, have considered herself bound to do had the choice been allowed her; and she had no alternative but to listen meekly to the many things which he poured into her ears.

He told her that, after reaching the North of Europe, he had sought employment under the Czar Peter of Muscovy, who at that time held out liberal inducements to foreign adventurers to enter his service—that he had found good promotion, and had risen reasonably high in command—that with much difficulty, and at the hazard of his life, he had visited England for no other purpose than that he might entreat her to become his wife; for that, without her, the good fortune which seemed now to be opening before him would be vain and valueless.

To which Clarissa answered, very simply, that of one thing he might always be confident, namely—that her hand would never be given to any other man, but that, once for all, she must tell him that her word was irrevocably pledged never to marry him, and that, whatever pain it might cost to do so, the promise she had given must be sacred.

It was in vain that he urged her again to open the subject to her father, and endeavour to obtain some remission of his stipulation; she assured him that she well knew the stubbornness of her father's will, and that he would never go back from a resolution which he had once formed.

In his disappointment at her refusal to accede to his request on this point, Maurice Turnbull declared that he would, at all risks, present himself before Mr. Brent, and represent to him the cruelty and injustice of his conduct.

This declaration obliged Clarissa to inform her lover of the critical state of her father's health, and that the agitation caused by seeing him might probably be attended with fatal results. This news again raised the young man's hopes. He endeavoured to convince her that in the event of her father's death her promise could no longer be binding, and that then at least she might promise to be his. But Clarissa only shook her head sadly; not even such an event, she said, could liberate her, for that she must equally hold herself bound to the dead as to the living; and then, entreating him not to add to her unhappiness by further importunities—which it was beyond her power to grant, and bitter pain to refuse—she made him promise not to visit Melcomb, nor seek to speak with her again.

Thus they parted; and, to the letter at least, Maurice Turnbull kept the promise she had wrung from him. He did not come again to Melcomb; and yet he could not leave the country without one more final effort. That night there came a messenger bearing a packet for Miss Clarissa Brent, and a small basket. They were sent by her lover; and the letter, dated from a well-known inn in the neighbourhood, set forth in still more tender terms, if such were possible, the same sentiments he had uttered in the morning.

It assured her that time and absence had not lessened, but increased his admiration and love for her; and that the readiness with which he had now risked his safety to see her might convince her how little he cared for life without her. If it was still her deliberate will, he said, that he should not again approach her, he could be loyal and obey, whatever suffering it might cost

him, even as he had been loyal to exile to his king; yet that one word from her would bring him joyfully to her side. He had sent her this missive, he told her, that she might once more well consider the matter; and he bade her reflect that perseverance in her present resolution would entail life-long sorrow on one, and, if he judged her rightly, on both of them. He knew, he said, that it would be difficult for her to send a messenger to him, and he had therefore sent one to her, which she could detain till she was quite sure of her final determination. His stay was wholly dependent on her pleasure; and the arrival of his messenger with an adverse decision would be the signal for his again setting out for his life of solitary exile, from which he could never hope or expect to return.

Clarissa Brent aftewards acknowledged that this last mental struggle was the most severe of all. She had thought that when she said farewell that morning everything was over, and that her conscience had triumphed; but now the strife had to be opened anew; and it went all the harder with her that now there was no immediate call upon her decision, and that she had time to realise the happiness which might be hers, and which she well knew that she must renounce. Yet she did not swerve from her determination. When morning came she had written a brief note, in which she simply repeated what she had said on the previous day, and bade adieu to Maurice Turnbull for ever. Then taking the pigeon from its cage, and caressing it for the sake of him to whom it was about to fly, she fastened the letter to its neck, and flung it from her window. "At that moment," she said, in speaking to Julia, long afterwards, of the circumstance—"at that moment I could indeed have said, without metaphor, that my last hope had flown."

NEWS FROM FAR.
Oh! letter, small and white
Thou art not to the sight
A thing to prize,
Yet when thou dost appear
What thoughts of hope and fear
In tumult rise!
What swift forebodings fill
With varying good and ill
The throbbing heart!
What quivering of the lips
As trembling finger-tips
Tear thee apart!

THE LAST HOPE GONE.

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EPILOGUE.

IT is possible that the reader may desire to know somewhat more of the after fate of the characters with whom they have become acquainted in the course of the two last chronicles. It is but little that I have to tell them, and in that little he will find that sadness predominates.

That episode in the life of Miss Clarissa Brent, which has last been related, was seen to work no outward change in her looks or manners; indeed, it passed unknown and unnoticed by all around her, and she was still the same gentle and cheerful being as before; nor did her father ever know how cruel a wound he had given to the happiness of the daughter he loved.

It was not long before she lost what was now apparently the one object of her life, for Henry Brent soon afterwards took his place among his ancestors beneath the parish church, and his son Richard succeeded him in Melcomb Manor.

But why should I seek longer to conceal from the reader that this Richard Brent was none other than myself? I it was who played the hero in the third of these histories, and it was I who now took up my abode in the home of my fathers, which now for a time seemed full of life and sunshine; for my beautiful Julia and our three children gave youth and brightness to the grey old walls.

Clarissa still remained with us; and, alas! her loving care and tenderness were not long to remain without objects for which all

their gentleness would be needed. Whether the seeds of disease had been sown in Julia's delicate constitution on the night of that terrible walk, I know not; but soon after this time she began to droop and fade, and, in spite of all our solicitude, passed away from us. Then, one by one, our little ones followed her; and I and Clarissa were left alone.

I had bitter griefs then; but she knew how to make them fall less heavily. I did not, as most people do, feel my bereavement fully at the time; my great loneliness has been reserved for after years. For long now I have been quite alone. None of my family remain to cheer me with their love or sympathy. Alice died early; Charles, doubtless, has long been dead, but uncertainty hangs over his fate; and Clarissa's tablet in Melcomb Church records that she died, unmarried, in the thirty-fourth year of her age. It also states that she was beloved by all who knew her. In that epitaph there is no touch of falsehood.

Of Maurice Turnbull nothing more was ever heard. Whether, careless of his life, he threw it rashly away in a stranger's quarrel, or whether in time he forgot his first love, and became the husband and father of a happy family in the land of his adoption, I never could discover. But he never came to Melcomb again; nor, to the best of my knowledge, was the spectral form of the Green Huntsman ever again known to appear in the Haunted Hollow or in Melcomb Woods.

And at this place it will be needful that I should bring my chronicle to an end. In telling these stories of the bygone fortunes of my family, and of my own past life, I have at least been able to shake off some oppressive thoughts, and to while away some hours of weariness. For the time being my labour has peopled these solitary walls with a goodly company—phantoms truly, yet phantoms, it may be, whose society has given pleasure to others as well as to myself. If they have indeed done this, they have performed the task required of them. Let them now fade away, pass, and be forgotten.

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